Love in the Time of Cholesterol

A Memoir with Recipes

CECILY ROSS


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McGraw·Hill

New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

0-07-148328-4

The material in this eBook also appears in the print version of this title: 0-07-146494-8.

DOI: 10.1036/0071464948

For Basil

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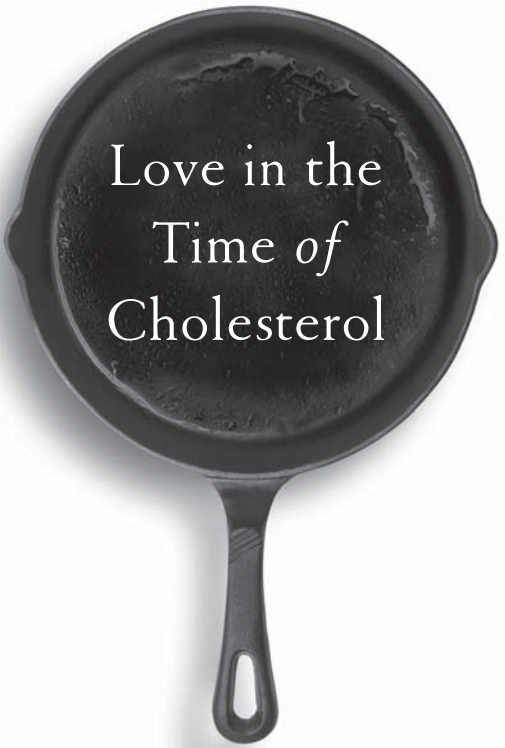
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An Uphill Journey

April 2004

This is a story with a happy ending, a story that began not far from the outcropping of rock overlooking Georgian Bay where Basil and I are standing on this cold April morning. From here, the highest point on a hiking trail that snakes its way through southern Ontario from Tobermory to Niagara, we can see the deep blue indent of the bay as it curves around to Wasaga Beach and beyond. Behind us, the hills that rise up from the Pretty River are a ghostly expanse of bare maple and beech woods punctuated by inky blots of spruce and the occasional scarlet flash of a barn roof. Overhead, the sky, a hard and cloudless blue, seems close enough to touch.

It has taken us a long time to get here, much longer than the hour-long climb we have just completed along a path either thick with frozen mud or heavy with snow. And though the breeze that greets us is icy with the memory of winter, the sun is shining with a determined brilliance, and we are breathless and flushed, warmed by the exertion of our trek and grateful to be here—because we almost didn't make it.

It is Easter, and although we are not religious in an institutional sense, the spirit of rebirth is very much on our minds today. Basil and I are spending the weekend as we usually do at the small farmhouse in the village of Singhampton that for almost two years has been a weekend escape from the busyness of our Toronto lives. After this early morning pilgrimage, we will hike back down to our car and return to have brunch with my mother, who is our only houseguest for the holiday. After that, we plan to wrestle with some of the debris that winter has left in the garden, then take a couple of long hot baths before sitting down to the spring dinner that Basil has planned.

I say pilgrimage because this is not the first time we have set out on this hike. If our story has a starting point, it might as well be on a September day eighteen months earlier, a day very different from this one—thick and overcast, the air warm and heavy—when we set out on this same trail, determined to climb to its highest point. That was also the day that we realized something was very wrong with Basil's health.

One of the reasons we had purchased our little house overlooking the Mad River that summer was because the 350-mile Bruce Trail was close by. In the five years we had been married Basil and I had walked hundreds of miles together along sections of this trail, which follows the Niagara Escarpment, a glacial legacy of superlative scenery and terrain running the length of southern Ontario. Now one of the most beautiful sections was right at our back door.

The trouble was that Basil hadn't been feeling well for several months. His symptoms were unspecific—low energy, fatigue, mild depression, and a nagging, persistent anxiety—and seemed to have no apparent cause. Everything else in our lives was going very well. We both loved our jobs. I was food editor at *The Globe and Mail*. And Basil had only months earlier been hired as associate dean of Media Studies at Humber College, a dream job for him after twenty years on both

the editorial and business side of several major newspapers and magazines. We owned a comfortable house in downtown Toronto and had just bought this charmingly shabby house in the country, something we'd both long dreamed about.

At the time, Basil was forty-four years old, a slim and fit six feet two inches tall. He didn't smoke, watched his diet, and exercised regularly. He was in the prime of his life, and yet for months he had been laboring under a lingering malaise that made it difficult for him to get out of bed in the morning and left him tired after minor exertion and depressed and irritable a lot of the time.

"Something is the matter with me," he would often say, but he was unable to be more specific. Something, yes, but what? He was still my Basil, funny and affectionate, generous and game, but slowly, slowly his energy and enthusiasm seemed to be seeping away, like a balloon imperceptibly losing air. Occasionally he was given to outbursts of anger that seemed all out of proportion to whatever the cause. And during my own not infrequent bouts of solipsism, I began to wonder if our marriage was making him unhappy. I was starting to feel oppressed by his "moods," by the fact that he never felt well, was so often sad and defeated and always, always tired—and also by the fact that there seemed to be nothing I could do to cheer him up.

All through the spring and summer of that year he struggled to keep his spirits up and to marshal enough energy to embrace his demanding new career. On weekends we tried to relax and stay active. He had stopped going to the gym to work out and by now walking, reading, and cooking—things we'd always shared a passion for—were the limits of our activity.

Why I thought it would be a good idea to hike to the top of the Bruce Trail on that muggy September afternoon I'll never know. In retrospect I think it was another symptom of

the extreme denial we were both in. It simply did not occur to either of us that there could be anything seriously wrong with a man so young and fit and healthy. And so we set out on what should have been a walk in the park and what might have been, I now realize, the last walk we ever took together.

Fifteen minutes after we set out from the parking lot across a flat field and up the gradually sloping trail through scrubby meadows buzzing with goldenrod and wild aster Basil had to stop and rest. I turned to wait for him and saw that perspiration was pouring down his face, though we were taking it very slowly and the real climb had hardly begun. We leaned against an ancient maple tree while Basil struggled to take a few deep breaths. Even from here the view was beautiful, the high hills tinged with red and gold, a patchwork of farmers' fields falling away to the horizon.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, sure, just a little indigestion, that's all."

We set off again. Slowly, stopping to rest every five minutes or so. At the top of the meadow, the trail forked and we took the right branch, which led us into a farmer's field and along an old road allowance. The trail leveled out here and Basil seemed better until we realized that we had lost track of the white trail markers and must have taken the wrong fork. We retraced our steps and this time headed off to the left, into the woods, and started up a steep hill. Halfway up, Basil, so young, so strong, so full of life, was gasping for air.

"Ces," he said, "I can't go on. I'm sorry. We have to turn back."

There was nothing to do but give up and make our way back to the car and home again. This time I was really worried and so was Basil. Our fears, it turned out, were amply justified. Basil was a ticking time bomb, and a few weeks later he found himself in the hospital awaiting open-heart

surgery. A little indigestion indeed. And so began his difficult journey from near death to the peak we are standing on today, muddy and tired, yes, but contemplating a future as expansive as the view before us and as promising as spring. This is the story of that journey.

Leek and Smoked Salmon Frittata

In the old days, we would have celebrated Easter morning with a cheese- and cream-laden strata or masses of scrambled eggs and sausages. Now we start the day—as we do almost every morning during the chilly season—with a bowl of oatmeal and whatever fruit we have on hand: raisins, frozen wild blueberries, raspberries, or bananas. But later, after our bracing walk in the woods, we feel like something savory and substantial for lunch. It took me a long time to convince Basil that eggs have been unfair victims of cholesterol hysteria. In fact, they are highly nutritious, high in protein and calcium. We try to buy fresh, organic, omega-3-enriched eggs and to prepare them with as little added fat as possible.

This baked omelet is foolproof and delicious. If there are leftovers, have them cold for lunch the next day, or cut them into small squares and serve as hors d'oeuvres.

3 large eggs
2 tablespoons low-fat sour cream
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
2 ounces smoked salmon, slivered
1 teaspoon unsalted butter
2 teaspoons olive oil
1 leek, rinsed and chopped, white part only
¼ teaspoon caraway seeds
3 tablespoons crumbled chèvre (goat cheese)

Preheat broiler. Beat the eggs, sour cream, and pepper together in a mixing bowl. Add the smoked salmon and stir. Melt the butter and oil in a 10-inch nonstick ovenproof skillet. Sauté the leeks and the caraway seeds until the leeks are golden.

Lower the heat and stir in the egg mixture. Cook slowly until the bottom is set, about 3 minutes. Sprinkle with chèvre. Place the skillet under the broiler and cook until the eggs are set and the cheese is slightly melted.

Serve immediately. Serves 2.

Gabriola Granola

Because eggs have become a weekend treat, we eat lots of cereal during the week. This recipe comes from a bed-and-breakfast we stayed at a few years ago on Gabriola Island, one of British Columbia's Gulf Islands.

6 cups rolled oats
1 cup sunflower seeds
1½ cups chopped almonds
1⅓ cups unsweetened coconut
⅓ cup sesame seeds
½ cup safflower oil
¾ cup liquid honey
1 cup raisins
½ cup chopped dates

Preheat oven to 400°F. Stir together dry ingredients in a large bowl. Add oil and mix thoroughly. Add honey and mix again.

Lightly oil a large roasting pan. Spread granola out evenly. Roast for 10 minutes. Stir well. Roast for 15 minutes more,

stirring frequently. Watch carefully to make sure it doesn't get too dark.

Remove from oven and stir in raisins and dates. As it cools, stir often to break up any lumps. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Makes about 12 cups.

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Love Is Blind

The day after our aborted hike, the pain in Basil's chest began to get worse. Back in the city, he finally made an appointment to see his doctor, but not because he suspected heart problems. For several weeks, Basil had been taking an anti-inflammatory to relieve a painful flare-up of arthritis in his left hand. The downside of many arthritis medications is that they are very hard on your stomach. So, when he began having pains in his chest that felt like severe heartburn, he assumed the drugs were to blame. We both did, because that was what we wanted to believe.

It was one more instance of Basil's willful dismissal of the real state of his health. He had long insisted, for instance, that he didn't really have high blood pressure, although every time he went for a checkup, it registered in the dangerous 130/90 range. And this despite the fact that he had long been taking a diuretic and beta-blockers to keep it under control. Basil's explanation was that he had "white-coat syndrome," an irrational fear of doctors that sent his blood pressure soaring whenever he was around them or had to go to the hospital. He insisted to me, who had little idea of what high blood pressure was let alone why it was bad, that when he took his own pressure quietly at home it was perfectly normal.

It made sense that Basil would have such a phobia. When he was just four years old, he was diagnosed with a congenital hip disorder called Legg Perthes. For more than two years, this bouncing little boy was completely immobilized by the plaster cast that encased him from his waist to both ankles. He didn't walk again until he was six years old. Periodically the casts would be removed and little Basil would be kept in the hospital for two to three weeks at a time for "observation." His memories of this period are vivid and painful, particularly his stays in the hospital. Now every time we drive by the windowed fortress that is St. Joseph's Hospital on our way out of the city, Basil is reminded of the long days and nights when he was a little boy sitting in his wheelchair willing his mother to come and take him home.

Sometimes the truth can have its face inches from yours and you still can't see it. His father had died of heart failure in his late forties, when Basil was only nine years old; so had most of his aunts and uncles. His mother died of an aortic aneurysm when she was sixty-nine. Basil and his two older sisters often joked about their bad genes, about the fact that nobody in their family lived much past sixty. But it was a joke right? A joke, but a very bad one.

This time, though, as his chest pain worsened, I think that on some level Basil knew. The day he was to see his doctor about what I in my Internet ramblings had now determined was GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disorder), he called me at work.

"You know, I think I might have angina." He delivered this diagnosis as though it were a one-liner in a stand-up comedy act. Basil has always used humor to ease stress and cover his anxiety. His whole family is like that; you can almost never get a serious answer out of them. Table talk at Guinane family dinners is usually an extended whirlwind of quips and mimicry—

everyone from Bugs Bunny to Homer Simpson to the Marx Brothers getting in on the action. They are hilarious, of course. This is their way of avoiding the inevitable tensions that arise when families get together. *Keep it light, keep it bright, and we're less likely to kill one another* is Basil's rationale.

So, I laughed. Angina? Oh sure. Ha, ha.

And when he tossed off his theory to Dr. Crawford, her reaction was the same.

"You don't have angina," she said firmly. "It's the anti-inflammatory." She scratched out a prescription and gave it to him. "Take this," she said, "and come back and see me in two weeks."

Dr. Crawford had prescribed a powerful antacid to counteract what she thought were the side effects of the arthritis medication.

"You see," I said, relieved despite my earlier certainty. "I told you."

At first, maybe because he was so tired of feeling awful all the time, Basil believed the pills were working. Or maybe he was influenced by my relentless refusal to acknowledge that anything bad was happening. He could tell how much I wanted him to be better, and so he willed it to be true. In my family, we have a tendency toward an almost aggressive optimism and rugged good health, a combination that sometimes makes it difficult for us to empathize fully. My sister Dori, for instance, was having trouble dealing with her young son Theo's chronic asthma. Full of energy and vigor herself, she found his fatigue puzzling and frustrating. One day the allergist handed her a drinking straw and said, "Okay, I want you to plug your nose and breathe through this for the next ten minutes and see how you feel."

I think it must have been like that for Basil. I wish now I had been listening harder, had been more sympathetic. Sometimes you can't just whistle your troubles away.

The next weekend, we invited the Ross clan to dinner in Singhampton to celebrate our fifth wedding anniversary. This included my eighty-year-old mother, my daughter Leah, who had flown in from London, where she was living for a year, my sister Nicky and her husband, Neil, and my brother Oker and his girlfriend, Sharda. Our house was sparsely furnished, and it was going to be a chaotic weekend with guests sleeping on sofas and even on the living room floor.

On Saturday morning, Basil and I decided to go for a short walk before the hordes arrived, because we knew we would soon be up to our elbows in giblets and Brussels sprouts. It was a lovely fall day, sunny and cool, a bronze haze coloring the treetops, wisps of mist hovering over the river. We drove the car to the tenth side road, parked it, and walked along a farmer's lane and through an old orchard. When the trail began to climb gently into the woods, Basil stopped to rest. Neither of us had forgotten the previous weekend's ordeal.

"It's much less painful, much better," he announced. "As long as I take it easy, I'm fine." Thank God, I thought, as we headed slowly back to the car holding hands. We spent the rest of the walk working out a game plan for the big meal that evening. No matter how many times I do it, I always find turkey dinners a challenge to prepare and serve. There are so many elements, and timing is crucial. And without a dishwasher, it's important to stay on top of the mess.

We had taken advantage of the best weather of the weekend for our short walk. By the time we got back to the house, clouds were moving in from the north and a brittle breeze had begun to blow. The next morning, there was a skiff of snow on the ground. Leah, Nicky, Neil, and I decided to explore some caves north of the village and then hike down to the Pretty River. Basil demurred, saying he would only hold us up, and anyway, someone should stay back with

Mum, who wasn't up for rock climbing either. While we were gone, he said he planned to split some more wood for kindling and make sure the bird enjoyed a regular basting.

Sure enough, when we got back, there was Basil with the brand new axe he had bought, splitting firewood on the concrete pad outside the back door. Beside him was a neat stack of matchstick pieces of wood.

He stopped as we drove in, wiped his brow, and grinned.

"That felt good. You know, I think it helps to use my upper body, loosens things up." He gestured behind him to where a potted shrub sat by the drive shed. "Ces, where do you want to plant that bush? I think I'm on a roll."

Together we selected a spot for the serviceberry; Basil dug a generous hole in the hard, gravelly earth, and we planted the first tree at our new house. Then we washed up and, tired as Basil was by then, together we served a traditional turkey dinner to my family. We stuffed the bird with a dressing of seasoned breadcrumbs tarted up with lots of chopped hazelnuts and dried cherries. These days, because of our fat fears, we cook the stuffing outside the turkey in a foil-wrapped pan, adding small amounts of drippings or stock to keep it from drying out. Gravy, too, is off limits, so we serve lots of cranberries on the side and lace the mashed potatoes with garlic and buttermilk (and just enough butter for a flavor hit).

This variation on pumpkin pie is made with low-fat condensed milk instead of the usual heavy cream.

Hazelnut and Dried-Cherry Stuffing

This recipe makes enough to stuff a 12-pound turkey or capon with lots left over to roast separately in a foil-covered pan. Dressing cooked inside the bird is moister, but it is also higher in fat.

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup chopped onion
2 cups crumbled day-old whole wheat bread
1 cup chopped hazelnuts
1 cup chopped mushrooms
1 cup vegetable stock
1 cup dried cherries or cranberries
¼ cup chopped parsley
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 tablespoon chopped sage leaves
1 tablespoon chopped rosemary
1 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Heat olive oil in a large skillet. Add the onions and sauté until soft. Add the bread, hazelnuts, and mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, 10 minutes more. Remove from heat and let cool.

Add the remaining ingredients and mix well. Place in an oiled casserole dish and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Bake alongside the turkey, adding stock or drippings occasionally to keep it from drying out.

Sweet Potato Pie

This variation on pumpkin pie is high in fiber and vitamin A. Using sweet potatoes means adding less sugar, and condensed milk is much lower in fat than cream but just as luxurious. We like single-crust pies because they have half the fat of two-crust pies. Be sure your pastry is made with lard or butter, not vegetable shortening, which is high in trans fats.

1 baked pie shell
2 cups mashed cooked sweet potatoes
3 eggs, lightly beaten

½ cup sweetened condensed milk
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
½ teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon cardamom

Combine the sweet potatoes, eggs, condensed milk, lemon juice, and seasonings and beat together until thoroughly blended. Pour into a baked pie shell and bake in 300°F oven for about 30 minutes, until a knife inserted in the filling comes out clean.

Tips

At Ross family dinners, it has always been my job to make the gravy. Indeed, among certain relatives I had a reputation for transforming pan juices into a rich, brown velvety sauce thick with flour and fat. Somehow, I was the only one who could be counted on to banish the lumps. These days I'm out of a job, since we no longer serve pan gravy. Sometimes I miss it but not that much. Now I pour off all but a tablespoon of fat from the roast and add some wine and stock (cooking liquid from whatever vegetable you are having works well), salt and pepper, and a scant teaspoon of Dijon mustard to the pan. I bring the mixture to a boil, stirring to scrape up the brown bits stuck to the bottom. When it has thickened slightly, I taste it, adjust the seasonings, and serve—lumps and all.

And be sure to order a fresh turkey from your local butcher. Stay away from frozen supermarket birds, which are mass-produced, tasteless, and shot full of hormones and preservatives.

3

Getting to Know Him

When we started dating, Basil was a thirty-nine-year-old bachelor living alone in a house he had bought after his mother died. He was then, and still is, a homebody. When he wasn't at work or at the gym, he spent his time reading, cooking, or watching movies on a small black-and-white television. In many ways, he was living much as he had when he was a student: He slept on a futon, didn't own a car, didn't even have cable TV. He'd never been married, though he'd recently ended a seven-year live-in relationship. His somewhat pared-down existence was enlivened by a very fat cat named Pinkie and the beautiful antique furniture he had inherited from his mother. He also bought art, went to the theatre, and loved opera and the blues.

His life was steeped in the routine imposed by his job at *Maclean's* magazine, a national newsweekly, and the master's degree he was working on part-time. He had a girlfriend, whom he went out with once a week, and a handful of friends for movie and dinner dates, one of whom was me.

Basil and I first met when we worked together at *Maclean's* a few years earlier, and after I left the magazine, we stayed in touch sporadically. The house he bought just happened to be on the street where I lived—only two blocks away. We ran

into each other a lot after he moved into the neighborhood. Now and then we'd go to a movie together or meet for coffee on Bloor Street. Our relationship was playfully flirtatious—me, the slightly jaded older woman, Basil, the shy gentleman. But neither of us had the confidence to take it any further. To me, seven years older, divorced with two grown daughters, he seemed impossibly innocent, though I know now that what I took for naivete is really a lack of artifice and an inability to prevaricate. Basil is without pretensions. And yet, perhaps to compensate for his lack of emotional carapace, he is an extremely private person, slow to trust, and reluctant to draw attention to himself.

At first, on our infrequent "dates," we would talk earnestly about movies and books and computer software. But as we became used to one another, I began pushing him to talk about himself. It was like coaxing a wary horse out of the barn. I asked about his girlfriend, about his past relationships, about his childhood and his family. Slowly we began to trade confidences.

I thought he was the loveliest man I had ever met, and on these outings I longed for him with a wistfulness that had no expectation of fulfillment. He seemed so unspoiled, like freshly fallen snow, his life just beginning, while I felt, at forty-six, that the fun and games were over. After twelve years of single parenthood and a number of disastrous affairs, I felt scarred and a little damaged. I was steeling myself for the long, slow slide into old age, and really it didn't seem so bad. My daughters, nineteen and twenty-two, were on their way to independence, I had a good job, and I owned my own house. The golden years beckoned, somewhat listlessly it's true, but where men were concerned, I was tired of the striving. Part of me longed to take a seat on the sidelines. With Basil, I resolved to be a friend and an older sister, and though

our connection deepened as time went on, I never once allowed myself to believe that he might be attracted to me.

We danced around each other this way for almost three years until one fateful February night. We had planned to go to a movie on a Tuesday evening, but Basil phoned the day before and suggested I come to his house for dinner instead. I agreed, not realizing when he called that this would be Valentine's Day. The next morning I phoned him at work to remind him that he really should be spending the occasion with his girlfriend, not me. But he brushed off my suggestion. He explained that he and his girlfriend weren't that close anymore, that things were winding down. It was too cold to stand in line for a movie; he'd make us something special.

There are few things more attractive to me than a man who can cook. My first husband, for all that he knew about spark plugs and drywall, only learned how to turn on the stove after we broke up, and then his repertoire, as our children will attest, consisted of two things: toasted cheese sandwiches and spaghetti sauce. My own father was an unusually good cook for a 1950s dad, though his specialties, which included lobster Newburg, New York–style cheesecake, and crepes Suzette, may have played some part in his death from heart disease when he was sixty-nine. At this point in our acquaintance, I didn't even know that Basil could cook, because true to form he had never mentioned it. So I had no idea what to expect when I walked the two blocks to his house on that bitterly cold winter evening.

There was a wood fire burning in the living room and Billie Holiday playing on the stereo. Basil was more relaxed than I had ever seen him, much less skittish than usual, and the breath of sadness that sometimes clung to him was gone. For Basil, he was almost exuberant. He uncorked a bottle of zinfandel, poured me a glass, and excused himself to check on the

good smells coming from the kitchen. This was the first time I had been in his house, and I immediately felt at home. It was a Victorian red-brick semidetached with gleaming hardwood floors and an open-concept living and dining room. The focal point was the solid cherry fireplace with a mirror over the mantelpiece and a brass firebox. Arranged around it was a big, overstuffed chair with thick wooden claws for feet and a square three-seater sofa in a shiny blue material covered with gold stars. A pair of impressionistic black-and-white etchings hung on one wall, on the other a series of three watercolors. Beside the bookshelves stood a two-foot-high stone statue of a horse with no legs. I walked over to look at his books.

"You've read Umberto Eco?" I said when he came back into the living room with a plate of slivered smoked salmon and crackers. I myself had tried to make it through *The Name of the Rose* but had finally lost patience with its postmodern verbosity.

"And Don DeLillo?" (Same problem—too many words, too little story.)

"Well, yes . . ."

"And who's this Patrick O'Brian?" One whole shelf was taken up with about twenty blue-and-white volumes with titles such as *Master and Commander*, *Desolation Island*, and *Treason's Harbor*.

"Ah, Patrick O'Brian. You don't know Patrick O'Brian?"

I shook my head. I knew Basil liked to read, but the variety of his taste was impressive. And art, a man who buys art. . . . I looked at him standing beside me. He was so tall and straight, his shoulders big and reassuring, his face smooth and open. A ripple of longing like a hunger pang ran through me. I let my thoughts turn to dinner.

"What are we having?" I asked as I followed him into the kitchen. He pulled a sizzling, golden whole chicken from the oven and then a pan of roasted potatoes. The smell of rose-

mary and garlic billowed into the room. While I watched, he placed thick slices of chicken breast and a scoop of potatoes on two plates. Then he spooned a trio of tiny cooked beets beside them. On the table was a simple salad of baby spinach dressed with lemon juice and olive oil. Nothing fancy, just good food beautifully prepared.

After dinner, Basil opened a second bottle of wine. We sat on the sofa by the fire and talked. I felt happy and comforted. He was sitting half turned so that he was facing me, one leg drawn up, his arm lying lightly along the back. Did I think it was possible for a man and a woman to be friends, he wondered.

"No." I was adamant on this issue. Something always gets in the way. If two people of the opposite sex like one another enough to spend time together, then inevitably one or the other is attracted physically and decides to act on it. And whatever the outcome, it's then no longer a simple friendship but something else.

Basil disagreed. "I think it's possible," he insisted, "to like a person of the opposite sex without any overtones. Some of my best friends are women."

Like you for instance. I was waiting for him to say it. My heart was sinking like mercury on a cold night in February.

"Yeah, well, they're probably all dying for you to make a move," I said and immediately wished I hadn't.

Then, and I think Basil surprised himself more than he surprised me, he leaned over, slid his arm around my shoulders, and kissed me. It was the beginning of something else.

Basil's Roast Chicken

In the kitchen, Basil is a meat-and-potatoes kind of cook. He prefers simple ingredients simply prepared. His motto is "the

less chopping the better." Since he does most of the cooking on weeknights, we have roast chicken at least once a week, but we never tire of it. And the leftovers are always welcome for sandwiches. Straightforward as it is, it's also a favorite meal to serve last-minute dinner guests.

Don't even think about using anything except free-range or organic chicken. If you're still eating supermarket birds, you will be astonished at how rubbery and tasteless they are compared with good-quality chicken, never mind the health and ethical issues surrounding mass-produced chicken. This applies to turkey as well.

This recipe produces a beautiful, crispy skin on the chicken, which, alas, we do not eat (well, maybe one tiny piece) because of the fat content. Most low-fat recipes will tell you to remove the skin before roasting, but I throw caution to the wind and baste the bird frequently as it cooks. The result is juicy and flavorful even without the skin. Another concession you can make to low-fatness is to snip away the fatty deposits on either side of the bird's bum before you roast it.

Olive oil
1 4-pound free-range chicken
Kosher salt
½ lemon
1 sprig fresh rosemary
6 cloves garlic, unpeeled

Rub a small amount of olive oil onto the skin of the chicken. Sprinkle with salt and rub in. Place the lemon half and the rosemary in the cavity. Tie the legs together with string and place in a shallow roasting pan.

Scatter the garlic cloves around the chicken and place in a preheated 350°F oven. Roast for about 1½ hours, basting

two or three times. The chicken is done when you can jiggle the legs and the juices run clear.

Remove the skin and discard. Carve and serve with the roasted garlic cloves. (You squeeze out the soft, sweet paste.) Serves 2 with leftovers.

Rosemary and Garlic Roasted Potatoes

We never peel potatoes as most of the nutrients and much of the flavor are in the skins.

2 large Yukon gold potatoes, quartered, unpeeled
4 to 6 cloves garlic, unpeeled
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon fresh rosemary
Kosher salt

Toss the potatoes and the garlic cloves with olive oil to coat and place in a shallow roasting pan. Scatter with rosemary and salt. Roast in a 350°F oven for 45 minutes, turning frequently, until the potatoes are crusty and brown. Serves 4.

4

Denial Is More than a River

Two weeks after he began taking the antacid medication for what we all believed was GERD, Basil was again scheduled to see Dr. Crawford for a follow-up. It was such a beautiful fall day that he decided to walk the two and a half miles to her office. Until he began his job at Humber College that summer, Basil had lived and worked all his life in downtown Toronto. He had never even owned a car until he married me and became co-owner of a fifteen-year-old Honda that spent most of its time parked on the street outside our house. We walked everywhere.

Now, however, he had to climb behind the wheel every morning and face the insanity of freeway traffic for forty-five minutes twice a day. It was a major change in his routine—and a very stressful one. In fact, I had been against his accepting the job at Humber because I was worried about the commuting. I have always believed that being able to walk to work is one of the great benefits of urban life. It's not just a chance to have a little exercise at the beginning of our largely sedentary workday, it's a time to think, to daydream, and to be alone with yourself. You can't let your mind wander when you're hurtling along a nine-lane highway at sixty miles an hour dodging ten-wheelers and wannabe Indy racers.

And I know my Basil. Commuting was turning out to be a big adjustment for a man who really hadn't driven that much in his life. It didn't help that our car had no air conditioning and very poor suspension. All during the hot summer months after he started his new job until we finally bought a better, newer car, Basil ate exhaust fumes and fought panic on his daily getting-to-work gauntlet.

A doctor's appointment downtown in the middle of the week meant a welcome break in his routine. By the day of his appointment, Basil and I had still not discussed the fact that his condition was really no better since he'd begun taking the antacid. If anything, he was worse, and no amount of wishing had been able to change that. The day before, while attending a conference downtown, he had gone for a walk after lunch with a colleague and again the pain in his chest was so bad that he had to stop. "It was as though the ground shifted under my feet," he told me much later. "I had this intense dizzy spell, and I had to put my hand on James's shoulder and ask him to help me back to the convention center."

Basil set out on foot for Dr. Crawford's office on a Thursday morning. Fortunately, I was working at home that day, because ten minutes after he left the house, he called on his cell phone to say he couldn't go any farther. I jumped in the car and picked him up from the street corner where he was waiting, just standing there leaning against a brick wall looking defeated and afraid. I dropped him off outside the medical center and said I would park the car and come in with him, but in typical fashion, he insisted on going alone. He promised me he'd take a cab home—enough walking for one day.

Now I was really worried; there was no way this was simple indigestion. The penny dropped for Dr. Crawford, too, and she was on the phone immediately to a cardiologist whose

office was in the same building. She persuaded him to squeeze Basil in the very next day, though the usual wait can be up to three months.

Even then she didn't want to alarm him.

"He's going to give you a stress test, just to be on the safe side," she said.

"Go home and rest," she called after Basil as he was leaving the examining room, "and don't do anything strenuous."

Stress tests are given to determine how well your heart handles work. A technician applies several sticky discs to your chest that are attached by wires to a heart monitor. Then you are asked to walk on a treadmill while the speed is gradually increased. Eventually, the treadmill is tilted to produce the effect of going up a small hill until a certain level of exertion is reached. For a person in top physical condition, this can take as long as fifteen or twenty minutes. For someone unused to physical activity, it's a lot shorter. Basil didn't even get up to bat. The first thing Dr. Elzawi, an avuncular, middle-aged Egyptian, did was order an electrocardiogram (ECG) and an ultrasound for Basil. While he was having the tests, Dr. Elzawi came in periodically to check on the results. When they were finished, he ushered Basil into his office and asked him to sit down.

"I am not going to give you a stress test today," he said, "because it would probably kill you. You are in need of immediate medical attention. You have a condition called unstable angina, likely caused by an arterial blockage that is interfering with blood flow to your heart."

Basil was stunned, even though he knew by now that something was seriously wrong. Why else would he be sitting in a cardiologist's office? Just the day before when he had called his boss, William, to say that he wouldn't be in to work because he had yet another doctor's appointment, he

finally told him about the pains in his chest, about how they were circumscribing his life and how worried he was. He knew in his heart it couldn't be simple indigestion; he'd just been unwilling to confront the possibility that it was this bad.

And it got worse. According to Dr. Elzawi, there was damage to Basil's heart, indicating that he had already had a heart attack.

"I want you to go home, pack your things, and go straight to the emergency ward at Toronto General. Give them this letter, and they will admit you right away." Basil's condition was critical, and he could not afford to wait the weeks or even months it might take to get an angiogram—the test that would show the extent of his arterial blockage. TGH, said Elzawi, was one of the best places in Canada for treatment of heart disease.

When the doctor saw the effect this news was having on Basil, he tried to soften the blow. "Don't worry. We won't let anything happen to you. You're young, and other than your heart, you're in good health. They'll probably put in a stent and send you home as good as new."

He was referring to angioplasty, a procedure in which an inflatable balloon is used to open a blocked artery and then a small tube called a *stent* is inserted to keep it open. It's an intricate procedure, but the patient goes home in twenty-four hours and is back at work within a few days.

Driving home from the doctor's office, Basil felt numb as the enormity of what he had just heard began to sink in. Only that morning, everything had seemed normal. He had packed his bag to take to the country for the weekend. All our stuff was waiting by the front door: the cooler full of food, the dog, me. We were to leave as soon as he got back, eager to beat the traffic on this mild late October afternoon, maybe the last fine weekend before winter. Now, everything had changed.

I was upstairs working in my office when Basil came through the front door. I heard the dog bark his usual greeting and then the house was silent.

"How was it?" I called from my desk. Basil didn't answer.

"Bas? Are you there?"

When he still didn't answer, I went to the top of the stairs. He was sitting in the big red armchair by the fireplace with the dog on his lap. His head was bowed, one hand cradling his forehead; his eyes were closed. When he opened them, I could see they were full of tears.

"Ces," he said, "I'm so sorry. We can't go to the country this weekend. I have to go to the hospital." In a trembling voice, he told me what had happened.

"It's probably nothing serious," he started to say. And when I gave him a look that said *Oh no you don't, not this time*, he put his arms around me and started to cry. Then he pulled himself back and squared his shoulders. I was crouched in front of him, my arms on his knees. Little Harpo licked my face and then Basil's, and I took his face in my hands—his broad forehead and wide-set hazel eyes, his gentle cupid's bow mouth. Even with his prematurely gray hair, it was a young face, a face that hid nothing—anger, joy, embarrassment, fear; no matter what he was feeling, the emotion lit up his features like surtitles at the opera. His emotional candor was one of the most engaging things about him. It was also the thing that was trying to kill him. Because Basil, sweet and fearful Basil, feels everything. He has no shell.

But he does have a sense of humor. Even then.

He widened his eyes and drew his mouth into an exaggerated grin. "You know," he said, "sometimes denial is more than a river."

I wanted to slap him; I was on the verge of tears myself. He was a walking time bomb, he might have died, and here

we were laughing about it. His joke had the desired effect; it jolted us into action. Now was not the time for self-pity. We had an emergency on our hands.

On the ten-minute ride to the hospital, I asked Basil about the damage to his heart that had shown up on the ECG.

"I know when it happened," he said. "The heart attack, I mean. Remember way last spring, I went to the gym, and when I was on the treadmill I started having chest pains. Remember?"

I did indeed. It was a Saturday morning in late May, before we had bought our house in Singhampton, before Basil got his new job. He had ridden his bike to the gym at Hart House at University of Toronto, where he had been working out two or three times a week for more than twenty years. While he was on the treadmill, he felt a crushing pain in his chest. It was so intense that he had to lie down on the warm-up mats beside the track. He was certain he was having a heart attack and that he was going to die.

"All I could think about," he told me later, "was that I wouldn't see you again."

And so, when the pain gradually subsided, what did Basil do? Call 911? Ask someone to drive him to emergency? No, none of the above. He grabbed his gym bag from his locker and, without stopping to shower or change, jumped on his bike and rode home.

I remember it well. I was in the kitchen making salsa, a fairly elaborate exercise that was our next big culinary thing at the time. The front door was open because it was a beautiful mild morning. I heard Basil locking his bike on the porch, and he came charging through the front door wearing

an old T-shirt and gym shorts. He was out of breath and damp with perspiration, but he strode into the kitchen and pulled me into a big hug.

"I was on the treadmill," he said, still holding me tightly, "and I thought I was having a heart attack. I was afraid I'd never see you again."

I wiggled out of his arms. The ancho chiles I was dry-roasting in a cast-iron skillet on the stove were beginning to smoke.

"A heart attack? How do you feel now?"

He looked so fine standing there, broad-shouldered and tall, his hair blown around, his face grizzled and ruddy, he looked so strong and young and fit.

"I'm okay, I think," he said. "The pain was awful, but it's gone now."

"A heart attack," I said. I pulled the pan off the element and turned the gas off. Then I checked the tomatoes and onions that were roasting in the oven. Nothing had burned. Disaster averted.

"I'll make you some coffee."

"Sure. Just give me a minute. I need to shower."

And that, believe it or not, was that—for the time being at least. The moral of the story, of course, is this: If you think you are having a heart attack, you just might be having one. And it's true, denial really is more than a river.

Red Chile Salsa

Real Mexican food is nothing like the nachos dripping with melted cheese or tacos laden with sour cream that we're used to. I learned this on the half-dozen trips I've taken to Mexico but most of all from chef Rick Bayless's cookbooks. I have adapted this "cooked" salsa from *Salsas That Cook* (Fireside

Books). It can be frozen, or it keeps for about five days in the refrigerator. Use it to dress up meat or fish dishes, as a marinade for chicken, as a pasta sauce, or as a dip for tortilla chips.

My favorite use for it is as a base for Bayless's excellent tortilla soup, which, I think it is safe to say, is my favorite soup of all time.

Dried chiles come in many varieties, and chile aficionados are passionate about the differences. This recipe calls for dried New Mexico chiles, but I have made it successfully with dried guajillo or chipotle. You should be able to find some kind of dried chile at the supermarket. Chipotle in adobo are canned hot peppers in a tomato sauce. They're widely available in supermarkets or Latin American grocery stores.

8 dried chiles (about 2⅔ ounces)
7 medium-sized fresh tomatoes
1 small white onion, sliced ¼-inch thick
1 head of garlic cloves, peeled
½ cup water (approx.)
1 teaspoon chipotle in adobo, chopped
½ teaspoon dried oregano
3 tablespoons cider vinegar
1 tablespoon salt
½ teaspoon sugar

Pull the stem off the chiles, tear them open, and shake out the seeds. Place in a bowl, cover with hot tap water, and lay a plate on top to keep them submerged.

Lay the whole tomatoes on a baking sheet lined with foil. Broil for about 6 minutes, until darkly roasted and blackened in spots—the skins will split and curl. With a pair of tongs, flip them over and broil for another 6 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Preheat oven to 425°F. Separate onion into rings and place on a foil-lined baking sheet with garlic. Roast, stirring every few minutes, until the onions and garlic are soft and browned in spots, about 15 minutes or longer.

Drain the chiles. In a food processor, combine the chiles with the tomatoes and their juice and puree until fairly smooth. Chile skins are tough, so it may take awhile. Scrape ⅔ of the puree into a bowl. Add the onions and garlic to the processor with the rest of the tomato puree and pulse until it is finely chopped. Add a little water if the mixture is too stiff. Stir in the chipotle, oregano, and vinegar. Scrape the mixture into a bowl.

Taste and season generously with salt. Taste again and add a little sugar. Makes about 5 cups.

Tortilla Soup

The most dramatic way to serve this is to place the garnishes (avocado, cheese, and tortilla chips) in each soup bowl and to ladle on the dark, aromatic broth right at the table.

1 tablespoon olive oil
3 cups red chile salsa
4 cups chicken broth, preferably homemade
Vegetable oil for frying
6 to 8 corn tortillas, cut into ¼-inch strips
1 cup shredded Monterey Jack or cheddar cheese
1 large ripe avocado, peeled and diced
2 limes, quartered

Heat the olive oil over medium-high heat until it is very hot. Add the salsa and stir continuously until it is cooked down to a thick paste, about 10 minutes. Add the chicken

broth, partially cover, and simmer over medium-low heat for 45 minutes.

Heat a tablespoon of vegetable oil in a nonstick pan over medium heat. Fry the tortilla strips in batches until they are crisp and golden, adding more oil if necessary.

Divide the cheese, avocado, and tortilla strips evenly among six bowls. Ladle on the soup and serve with lime wedges. Serves 6.

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Entering the Labyrinth

At 3:00 P.M. on a Friday afternoon, the emergency waiting room at Toronto General Hospital was nearly deserted. I hadn't been to the ER for more than twenty years, not since my youngest daughter, Meghan, fell out of bed when she was three years old and split her chin open. That had been in the middle of the night, a time when most emergencies seem to occur, and as I recall it was a very busy place: There were ambulances coming and going, nurses and other staff running around, and weary parents like myself cradling sick and fussy children.

But on this day, other than Basil and myself, there was only one person there, a middle-aged woman in a brown cloth coat gazing out the windows that line three sides of the room. The day had turned cool and sullen. Drops of rain pecked at the glass. Every few moments she looked at her watch and sighed loudly. We did not make eye contact.

We gave Dr. Elzawi's letter and Basil's health-insurance card to a woman sitting at a desk behind a sliding-glass window. When she looked at the paper and then at Basil, I could almost read her mind.

"My doctor told me to come here. He said I should be admitted immediately," said Basil.

"Yes, he would say that, wouldn't he?" said the nurse as though we were trying to jump the line, which of course we were. Basil's robust good looks must have aroused her disapproval. "Why," the set of her mouth seemed to say, "should your case have preference over people who are much sicker?" While we were aware that there are waiting lists for beds, hospital tests, and surgery, we had no idea at this point that we might have been getting preferential treatment, that Dr. Alzawi had taken steps to see that Basil went to the front of the line precisely *because* he is young and in good physical condition.

"Take a seat, please," the nurse said after all the forms had been filled out. She shut the window to her airless little booth and resumed her paperwork.

As usual, Basil had brought lots of reading material. He fished into his bag, pulled out two hardcover novels, two *New Yorker*s, and a *Harper's* magazine, and held the pile out to me.

"No thanks," I said. How he could focus on anything at a time like this was beyond me. Basil has always been a voracious reader; we both are, except that I have difficulty concentrating if there are any distractions, while he finds that reading calms him and helps quiet the chatter in his head. Books are a refuge for him. Ever since he was a small boy, Basil has used reading to banish the unpleasantness of some external realities—hospitals, for instance.

He opened *A Sweeter Life*, the third novel written by a close friend, Tim Wynveen. I should have let him read, but I couldn't bear the silence. I wanted to talk. Maybe this is why we were here: I had driven Basil to the brink of heart failure with my ceaseless need for attention, my desire to know what he's thinking every minute of the day. *What is the point of having a thought if you don't express it?* is my philosophy. And Basil's? *What I'm thinking is probably of no interest to anyone but me.*

"How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy. Light-headed. Unreal. You know?"

I do.

"Listen," he handed me his cell phone. "Would you do me a favor and call William [his boss] and Nora and Joanne [his sisters]?"

In part, he sensed my restlessness and was giving me something to do. He had also just remembered that he had agreed to work the following day (a Saturday) at an open house for prospective students.

You're not allowed to use cell phones in hospitals because they interfere with sensitive electronic equipment (I wonder what all those type A banker heart patients think of that), which means we had stepped back in time about five years just by being here. It's amazing how quickly you start to take technology for granted. And the idea that everyone is instantly available all the time is one of the assumptions that has wormed its way into our lives, especially during times of personal crisis. In the coming weeks, simply tracking Basil down without a cell phone as he was ferried from one level of hospital care to another became a real problem. And although we hardly ever use our cell and have long and tediously ranted about its inherent evils, this was one period in my life when it would have been a great comfort.

I took the phone outside and left messages for all three, telling them to call me at home that evening even though I had no idea when I would be there. Then I left a message with our neighbors, Jamie and Avon, asking if they'd mind feeding the dog and taking him for a walk. When I got back to the waiting room, Basil was gone. I wandered down a corridor past the admitting office and into the emergency ward itself. It was busier here; a man with a bloodied bandage on his head sat on a gurney in the hallway talking to a couple of paramedics decked out in yellow-and-black firefighting gear. Crackling

speakers barked incomprehensible coded messages into the antiseptic air, and medical personnel scurried about. It was impossible to tell the doctors from the nurses because everyone wore more or less the same uniform—green surgical scrubs and sneakers, with stethoscopes draped around their necks.

The ward consisted of a central nurse's station with dozens of curtained-off alcoves arranged around the outside. In each was a chair and a narrow cot. A large black woman behind the counter directed me to one of the alcoves behind her. Basil had dutifully removed his clothes and was fiddling with the strings on the back of his blue hospital gown with shaking fingers. Through gaps in the curtain I could see another patient across a narrow corridor and another beside us, a very old man, who was groaning loudly. Basil looked scared, numb, and I know he found the lack of privacy, the close quarters, unnerving. His face was grayish with two spots of high color on his cheekbones. His expression was that of a bewildered schoolboy. I put my arms around him, gave him a small hug, and finished tying his gown.

"Thanks," he murmured and climbed under the sheet. He picked up his book and started to read, bringing it close to his face as though he hoped its fictional world would cancel this reality. A woman came in and wordlessly took his blood pressure and his temperature. Again we couldn't tell if she was a nurse or a doctor.

"You've been having chest pain?"

"Yes."

"Is there any pain now?"

"No."

"What does the pain feel like?"

"Tight. Intense pressure. Numbness in my left arm. Trouble breathing."

"Do you have the pain when you're at rest?"

"No."

"Okay. We're going to admit you, but it may be a day or so before there's a bed available."

With that she disappeared. Ten minutes later, a young man pulled back the curtain. He listened to Basil's heart and took his blood pressure.

"You've been having chest pain?"

"Yes."

"Any pain now?"

"No."

"What does it feel like?"

And so on.

In the next hour, Basil patiently responded to at least one more of these interrogations. There was some debate about whether he should be admitted under general medicine or cardiac, which of course meant nothing to us. In the end, they decided on cardiac. Then another person came in.

"We're going to move you again temporarily so we can hook you up to a monitor. You'll have a little more privacy."

By now it was past 6:00. I had been sitting on this hard chair behind this curtain for about three hours feeling entirely unreal. This was supposed to be an emergency and yet there was no sense of urgency, no adrenaline-induced intensity. I felt flat, numb, depressed. Basil was doing his best to retreat, to shut down; better not to think about anything. He began reading his book again.

A trolley showed up, and a man handed Basil a ham sandwich wrapped in plastic and a Styrofoam cup of weak coffee. He unwrapped it quickly, and we could both see a thick padding of butter between the slices of thin white bread and deli ham. No sign of mustard or lettuce. Basil hadn't put butter on a sandwich in years.

"They're trying to kill me," he muttered and wolfed it down anyway, not so much because he was hungry, but

because his blood sugar was getting dangerously low, making it harder for him to contain his anxiety.

"You should go," he said.

And I am ashamed to admit that I was relieved to hear him say it.

"I'll come back tomorrow, first thing. Ask them for a sleeping pill. That's one good thing about being here, lots of free drugs." He gave me a wan smile; I kissed him good-bye and hurried out into the night, still not fully absorbing the turn our lives had taken in a few short hours. Even as I slid my credit card into the parking garage machine to pay the whopping $35 fee, part of me was convinced that they had made a mistake. And so I was as chipper as I could be on the phone to Basil's sister Nora later that evening.

"It's probably nothing . . . not taking any chances . . . can't be too careful with chest pain. . . . Yes, he's fine . . . waiting for a bed." She offered to call Joanne and pass on what I had told her. Basil's boss left his home number, so I called him with much the same information. I considered calling my mother, but it was getting late and I was tired. I'd let her know tomorrow, and then I would call the girls, Meg in Ottawa and Leah in London.

There was also a message from Jamie and Avon. They still had the dog and, they said, lots of take-out pizza and a bottle of wine, if I hadn't eaten by the time I got home.

Suddenly I was starving. I thought of poor Basil and his meager ham sandwich and headed next door.

A Sandwich with a Big Heart

One of the great virtues of slathering sandwiches with butter, cheese, and mayonnaise (aside from the taste) is that

these things provide the glue that keeps the whole thing together. Without them, the innards slide around and lunch can suffer from terminal dryness.

The best substitute we have found for all that animal fat is ripe avocados. Although they're high in fat, it's good monounsaturated fat, the kind that lowers bad cholesterol in the blood. They're also higher in fiber than any other fruit and loaded with potassium, which helps to prevent stroke and high blood pressure. *And* they have zero cholesterol. In short, the perfect food.

Mash the avocado and spread as much as you want onto slices of multigrain or other high-fiber bread, and then pile on the fillings. Since ham is something of a no-no, we use sliced turkey breast instead. (Another way to add body to sandwiches without adding fat is with store-bought or homemade hummus.) We keep a jar of hot Italian antipasto spread in our fridge at all times. It adds a hot-pepper zing to pasta sauces and soups as well as sandwiches and is also good spread on low-fat crackers as an easy hors d'oeuvre.

2 slices multigrain bread
½ ripe avocado, sliced
½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
½ teaspoon antipasto spread (preferably Alessi brand)
2 slices deli turkey breast
2 slices roasted red pepper (store-bought is fine)
Sliced cucumber
Baby spinach or arugula leaves

Spread one slice of bread with mashed avocado (or hummus, or both) and the other with mustard and antipasto. Layer on turkey, red peppers, cucumbers, and spinach. Cut in half and serve. Serves 1.

Pissaladière

Next time you feel like pizza, skip all that cheese and put together this traditional Provençal tart. Hold the anchovies if you must, but remember that, of all the fish in the sea, these little guys have the highest concentrations of cholesterol-busting omega-3s. The recipe for the dough makes enough for two tarts, so you can freeze half for another time.

This makes an elegant and earthy light supper or lunch served with a green salad and a bottle of lightly chilled Bordeaux. *Voilà*.

Pastry

1¼ cups warm water
2 envelopes dry yeast
1 tablespoon honey
3 tablespoons olive oil
4 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons kosher salt

Topping

¼ cup olive oil
2 pounds yellow onions, halved and sliced ¼-inch thick
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
1 teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
3 whole cloves garlic
12 to 18 anchovy fillets
12 good-quality French black olives, pitted

Combine water, yeast, honey, and olive oil in a food processor. Add 4 cups of flour a little at a time with the salt and mix well until you have a soft dough. Process for two or

three minutes until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Turn out onto a lightly floured board and knead 10 or 12 times until the dough is smooth and elastic. Place the dough in a well-oiled bowl and turn to cover with oil. Cover the bowl with a damp kitchen towel and allow to rest at room temperature for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat olive oil in a very large skillet and cook the onions, thyme, salt, pepper, and garlic over low heat for 45 minutes. The onions should be soft but not browned. Stir from time to time. After 30 minutes, take out the garlic, chop it, and add back to the onions.

Divide the dough in half and roll into two smooth balls. Freeze one. Place the other on a baking sheet sprinkled with cornmeal and cover loosely with a damp towel. Allow to rest for 10 minutes. Roll the dough lightly with a rolling pin, then stretch it to a 10- by 15-inch rectangle.

Spoon the onions onto the dough, leaving a ¾-inch border at the edges. Arrange the anchovies on top in a crisscross pattern. Place an olive in each diamond. Brush the edges of the dough with olive oil. Bake in a 400°F oven for 15 minutes. Serves 4.

6

Home Alone

The morning routine at our house has made me the envy of everyone I know. Each day, Basil gets up at 6:45 A.M., goes downstairs, feeds the dog, lets him out, brings in *The Globe and Mail*, and makes a pot of fresh coffee. At 7:15, he brings me coffee in bed, and while he has his bath and gets dressed, I read the paper and we talk about our plans for the day.

This situation evolved because Basil is an early riser and I am not, and I don't have to be at work until around 10:00. At the risk of sounding shallow, Basil's being in the hospital meant that our schedule was now drastically rearranged. That first morning, Harpo was up and at 'em at half past 6:00, as usual. I dragged myself downstairs, fed him, and let him out into our tiny back garden for a whiz. While he was out, I put the kettle on to boil and went to the front door to get the newspaper.

It's still pitch-dark at that hour in late October, and although it wasn't particularly cold, a fine drizzle was falling. Harpo hates the rain, so I expected to hear him scratching at the door within minutes. But by the time the water was boiling, he still wasn't there. I stuck my head outside and called him. The streetlight in the alley behind the house cast a yellowish haze over the leaf-covered flagstones and bare shrubs

in the garden. Harpo, who is about the size of a large cat and the color of wet pavement, is nearly impossible to see in the dark. When we take him to the park at night, we have to put a flashing bicycle light on his collar so that we don't lose him in the shadows.

I called him again.

Nothing.

I stepped outside. Peering through the yellow mist, I saw that the back gate to our yard—which we never open—had somehow fallen off its hinges. Harpo had escaped.

I won't bore you with how besotted I am with this little dog; suffice it to say that the thought that I might lose him was enough to send me tearing out through the swinging gate and into the back alley in my slippers and a white terry-cloth robe. I began running along the pavement between the backs of the houses, calling his name loudly. Lights started popping on in upstairs windows as I ran (this was a Saturday morning, don't forget), but no sign of Harpo.

I got to the end of the alley and turned right heading toward the street and the park that is about two blocks from our house. I reasoned that this was his most likely destination because we go there every day to play. I was just about to cross the street when I noticed a couple of hulking forms in hooded sweatshirts sitting on a picnic table beside the empty wading pool. The red embers of their cigarettes glowed in the gray morning light. A car drove by, slowed down, and dimmed its lights as it passed me. I realized how I must look—like an escaped mental patient. The last thing I needed was to get arrested or mugged—or worse. I turned and skulked back into the alley and headed for home, still calling the dog, though not as loudly this time, but he didn't come.

I climbed over the fallen gate, let myself into the kitchen through the back door, and leaned against the kitchen

counter. My shoulders started to shake, and I could feel self-pity rising inside me like a soap bubble filling with air. Why did I always neglect those I loved? How had it come to this? My husband alone and afraid, languishing in the hospital; my dog wandering the wet streets, lost and confused; my children living in distant cities. Me here with no one to turn to.

It was tempting, I admit, to just go with it, let myself sink into the suds, but before I could, the bubble popped, just like that, Pop!, and I sucked in a lungful of air. First things first. I poured the not-quite boiling water over the coffee grounds, and while it was dripping I went upstairs and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. I carried my cup of coffee out onto the front porch. It was light by now—or at least as light as it was going to get on such a dreary day.

"Harpo," I called softly. I tried to whistle, but it came out like a high-pitched hiss. "Harpo," I called again and listened. I could hear rustling noises under the rhododendron bushes beside the porch. As I started down the steps, a small, black-whiskered face with shining brown eyes emerged from the bushes. Relief unfurled inside me like a sail.

"Harpo. Thank God, you're all right."

He gave a little hop when he saw me, then put his face down between his front paws and stuck his bum in the air, his stub of a tail beating like a metronome. And when I reached down to take him in my arms, he leapt to one side and darted back around the side of the house.

I received a more enthusiastic welcome from Basil a few hours later. During the night, they had moved him to a small, glassed-in enclosure in the emergency ward, where he was hooked up to a monitor that chronicled his every heartbeat on a small television screen hanging above his head. When I

opened the glass door to his room, he looked up from his book, and before his face could register my arrival, the purring green line on the screen began emitting a series of jagged, throbbing peaks, as though it were monitoring an earthquake. It was weird to actually be able to see that the emotions that announce themselves so intensely on the canvas that is Basil's face literally come straight from the heart. It made him seem more vulnerable than ever.

"So is that a clot in your artery or are you just happy to see me?"

He laughed, which was good.

"Sorry," I said. "That was bad; I couldn't help myself."

I gave him a hug and looked around his new digs. "This is better. Did you get any sleep?"

"Nope. This is a busy place on the weekend. It's been a long night."

Behind his round, metal-framed glasses, Basil's eyes were wide and strained, giving him the look of an aging Harry Potter. He was holding it all together, but just. When I took his hand, he began massaging my fingers fiercely. I could tell he was very scared.

Just then a couple of orderlies came into the room and announced they were taking Basil to the cardiac ward; a bed was available. They piled his overnight bag on the gurney and wheeled him out of the room, down a maze of corridors, and into an elevator. At the seventh floor, we all got off and proceeded down another short hallway toward a nurse's station.

As we marched into the unknown, I felt as though the halls were telescoping, as though I were in the eye of a camera. We were entering the narrow boundaries that would be Basil's world for the next seventeen days—a world of salmon-colored walls bathed in fluorescent light, of overheated stale air, of heels clicking on terrazzo floors and the brisk reas-

surance of nurses, of anxious anticipation, debilitating boredom, and very bad food.

I stayed with Basil that day for about four hours; it marked the beginning of our addiction to the Saturday crossword puzzle. There's not much to do in the hospital and, after a few days, very little to talk about. The puzzles provided blessed, almost mindless relief from the nagging worry pecking at us like a hungry chicken. I would get up beside him on the narrow bed, careful not to get tangled in the bundle of wires running from his chest to the small gray box pinned to his blue hospital gown. Any time that one of these came loose, a nurse would appear as if by magic to reconnect the wire. We may have thought we were alone, curled up behind our curtain, but Basil's vital signs were constantly monitored at the nurse's station; if one of the TV screens displaying his vital signs went blank, someone was there in an instant.

He spent seven days like this waiting for the angiogram, the test that would reveal the seriousness of the blockage in his arteries. He couldn't leave the hospital because he would lose his place in line. It was an odd time because he wasn't in pain or even feeling ill. The pains in his chest had not come back because his physical exertion was limited to short walks around the ward. I think he must have felt the way soldiers waiting to go into battle do—dread and anticipation at the same time, wanting it to be over so that the agony of not knowing would end.

This is the downside to Canada's universal health-care system—long waits for treatment that put lives at risk. The upside, of course, is that never once did we have to worry about how we would pay the enormous cost of the procedures he was undergoing.

It was odd how quickly Basil adjusted to the truncated universe of the cardiac ward. His world, once limitless, was

now reduced to a bed with a curtain around it, a shared bathroom, a six-inch-square television set, and a beige corridor encircling a bustling nurse's station. Within a day or two, it was as though the outside world had fallen away, and the rhythms and exigencies of "the ward" grew to fill the space left behind.

In this featureless, disinfected landscape, every bump on the horizon was greeted with anticipation that far outweighed the event. Meals, particularly for Basil, who was more scared than ill and whose appetite is impervious to everything, including imminent heart surgery, were eagerly awaited occasions.

The sound of the meal trolley coming down the hallway and the satisfying thwack of the plastic tray on the bedside table was enough to trigger a positively Pavlovian response, even though the contents lurking under the stainless steel plate warmer were hardly a mystery. *Bland, blander, blandest* pretty much summed up the hospital's idea of "heart-healthy" food. And Basil gobbled it up without complaint.

My routine consisted of going to work in the mornings and leaving at about 2:00 P.M. for the hospital, where I would sit with Basil until about 6:00, when his dinner arrived. Even in the monotonous landscape of waiting, it's hard to believe that anyone could actually look forward to the thrice-daily arrival of that plastic tray with the metal cover hiding another not-so-fresh horror. There were no repeats of the butter-laden ham sandwich; Basil had been placed on a strict "heart-healthy" diet plan. This essentially meant no fat and no salt. His meals were a study in blandness: plain oatmeal, canned peaches, dry white toast, sliced chicken, green beans, low-fat yogurt, and dry tuna sandwiches. All the food arrived at the same temperature, somewhere between lukewarm and stone-cold. I realize there are a lot of mouths to feed in a hospital,

but how hard is it to keep a little garlic on hand for flavor or a bit of parsley to brighten up a plate?

Basil didn't complain. He was grateful to be alive, and the one thing he could do was stick to this diet. In fact, he lost about seven pounds just lying there that first week. The only thing he drew the line at was the pale, insipid hospital coffee. Each day, I would bring him a cup of strong black java from the Second Cup franchise in the lobby. That, along with my arrival, were the high points of his day.

Most evenings after I left him I would go home and make myself some scrambled eggs or simple pasta and salad and eat it alone. I wasn't hungry in the usual way one is hungry at the end the day. It was more like an ache, an emptiness, which had as much to do with Basil's absence as with a need for food. But the process of preparing and eating a simple meal was in itself a comfort, an activity that made the fretting subside for a while. I wanted so badly to do something that would lessen Basil's anxiety, too, to find some panacea for the insidious way institutions have of eroding the spirit.

I decided I would take him his favorite food. Okay, not his all-time favorite, which would probably be a large steak, but his second-favorite food, for sure. About two blocks from my office is one of the city's best oyster bars. I called them up and ordered a dozen raw oysters on the half shell to go. An hour later, Basil and I were sitting on his bed in his semi-private room with the curtain drawn so that his neighbor, an elderly Italian man who'd had a stroke, wouldn't have to witness our bacchanal.

We toasted the (very uncertain) future with cans of barely chilled ginger ale and began slurping down oysters, each one dotted with freshly grated horseradish, a squeeze of lemon juice, and a dab of hot sauce. My intention had been to cheer Basil up, but my offering had the opposite effect. The more

oysters we consumed, the worse we started to feel. They were luxurious and decadent but in this setting, in these circumstances, almost obscenely so.

Sitting there, treating ourselves to what is a food of celebration, only brought home the fact that we were in no mood and no position to celebrate. And so with each swallow, we grew a little more depressed. It was turning out to have all the gaiety of a last supper. And our false cheerfulness only increased the discord. In the end, sated but in no way satisfied, I packed up the empty shells and promised Basil that the next time I'd come bearing simpler fare.

Fig and Olive Spread

Healthy but tasty snacks seemed to be the best way to enliven Basil's hospital diet. Since we couldn't share meals, I began packing small tubs of simple spreads and good bread and biscuits, which we would share during what passed for a "cocktail" hour.

The salty olives are a perfect counterpoint for the sultry sweetness of the figs. Serve this little symphony of flavors spread on rounds of toasted baguette or small slices of olive focaccia.

½ cup good-quality black olives, pitted
½ cup dried figs, cut into small cubes

Place the olives and figs in a food processor and pulse on and off until the mixture is well mixed but still chunky. Store in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Edamame Hummus

Look for bags of frozen edamame (fresh soybeans) in health-food stores or Japanese groceries. Boiled and lightly salted, they are a popular snack in Japan. But seasoned and pureed, they give traditional hummus a delicious and nutritious twist. Serve it warm or cold as a dip with crackers or vegetables. It also makes a great spread for salmon sandwiches.

1¼ cups cooked, shelled edamame
¼ cup olive oil
1 tablespoon lemon juice
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon minced fresh chives

Place the edamame in a food processor and process for a few seconds. Scrape down the sides and add the olive oil and lemon juice in a slow stream while the machine is running. Process until smooth.

Add salt and more oil if the mixture seems dry. Stir in the chives. Season to taste with lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

7

Boo Who?

Halloween is Basil's favorite holiday. Not mine. Ever since my kids had grown up, I had been turning out the lights early every year on October 31, drawing the curtains, and huddling in front of a TV set, hoping the little goblins would believe I wasn't at home and leave me alone. Somehow the annual trick-or-treat fest had turned me into more of a ghoul than a fairy godmother. Since my divorce, I felt the same way about Christmas. These were events for happy, intact families—vivid reminders of my failures in this area.

Then came Basil, bringing the spirit of childhood to my day of the dead.

He'd start talking about Halloween in mid-October. Each time he'd come upon a pile of pumpkins in the market, he'd stop and run his hands longingly over their cool, rippled shells, judging them carefully for symmetry and size, grasping the rough stems and testing their weight.

"We'd better get one soon," he'd say, as though there were a pumpkin shortage looming this time of the year.

"Not yet, Bas. It'll only sit on the front porch and rot. There's plenty of time."

On each trip to the supermarket, he'd load up on bags of hideous treats—tiny Tootsie Rolls, miniature Snickers bars, and little boxes of Chiclets. Basil doesn't have much of a sweet tooth, and he wouldn't touch this stuff even if he did. I, on the other hand, am a junk-food nut, and keeping that much candy in the house was a dangerous temptation. The first year after we were married, I insisted that we wait until the day before Halloween before we stocked up.

"Then if it's cold or rainy, we'll know to buy less stuff," I reasoned. I soon found that weather is not an issue on our street on Halloween. Although it's only two blocks long, Vermont Avenue is one of the kid-friendliest streets in the city. From the moment darkness falls at about 5:30 until bedtime—somewhere between 7:30 and 8:00—the leaf-strewn sidewalks are alive with witches and pirates, firemen and ballet dancers. One couple across the street creates a house of horrors complete with monster noises, fuzzy bats, and cobwebs under a canopy in their front yard. One year, a neighbor wrapped himself as a mummy and laid motionless on a lounge on his darkened front porch. Each time a child came up the steps, he'd rise stiffly to a sitting position and reach a bandaged hand into his bucket of treats.

The street is so popular that families from less child-friendly neighborhoods drive their kids here to make the rounds. It makes no difference if it's pouring rain or driving snow, there will be kids, loads of them, at our door on Halloween. Every year, no matter how much stuff we buy or how miserable the weather, we inevitably run out of treats before the last trickle—usually older kids—subsides. By 9:00, we find ourselves turning out the lights, drawing the curtains, and huddling in front of the TV, hoping they'll think we're not home.

For as long as it lasts, Halloween on our street is magical. The normally empty streets tremble with a hushed excitement; you can hear the rustlings and whispers of the children before they slide out of the darkness, urged on by ghostly adults, into the pools of lamplight, holding out their bags and pillowcases, their masked and painted faces bright and shiny as new pennies. This is the night they have been waiting for, the night they get to dress up and be someone else, to stay up past bedtime and gorge on things that are forbidden the rest of the year. This is the night when so many of the rules are broken—a night that honors the relief of escaping the self if only for a few hours.

But on what would have been our fifth Halloween together, Basil was imprisoned by more than the tyranny of his identity. This was the day that he was to have his angiogram, and we had more on our mind than pumpkins. After waiting six days, he'd finally made it to the front of the line. The hospital's resident cardiologist, Dr. Rukowski, was hopeful that the angiogram would show a minor blockage in his artery and that the technician administering the test would perform an angioplasty and place a stent in the artery on the spot. Basil would be back at work the following week. I was convinced this is the way it would go. And that morning, as they rolled his bed toward the elevators that would take him down to the X-ray department, I walked along holding his hand, giving him a cheerful pep talk. Basil was hopeful but, as usual, less sanguine than I was.

I knew how nervous he was, so I asked if I could be with him while they did the test (after all, family members are allowed to watch the birth of their babies), but the orderly said no. A student nurse, who was assigned to stay with Basil during the procedure, assured me she would take good care of him. He was taken to an X-ray room where they shaved

the hair from a spot on the left side of his groin. A catheter armed with a cameralike device called a *laparoscope* was inserted into the vein and fed up through his body until it reached the opening of the three coronary arteries. All the while, X-ray pictures were recording the catheter's progress.

Next, an iodinelike substance called *contrast* was squirted into the arteries to determine the extent of the blockages. Basil was conscious throughout, but because a topical anesthetic was used for the incision in his leg and there are no nerve endings inside the arteries, he felt nothing. The physician explained what he was doing each step along the way, and the student nurse filled in the blanks where she could. Basil could see the X-ray pictures on the screen, but to his untrained eye the swirling clouds of gray and black might as well have been approaching storms on a radar weather map.

The commentary stopped, though, once the physician began squirting the contrast into Basil's arteries. There was a lengthy silence while he fiddled and clicked and studied the monitor. It was then that Basil knew the news was not good, and dismay must have been written all over his face.

"You look scared," the doctor finally said.

"I am," Basil choked.

"Is it because you're afraid I'm going to hurt you or of what I'm going to tell you?"

"It's bad, isn't it?"

The doctor, who administers this same test dozens of times every week, delivered his diagnosis with a clinical matter-of-factness.

"Well," he said, "one of your arteries is 100 percent blocked and the other two are 90 percent blocked. I'm afraid there's nothing more I can do for you today."

He meant, of course, that Basil would have to have open-heart surgery. He had expected the worst and here it was.

The student nurse was rubbing his shoulder lightly. She, too, must have played this scene over and over again.

"You'll be fine," she said, "look how young and healthy you are."

There was nothing left but to take him back to his room. As the orderly started to wheel the bed out, the doctor pulled his eyes away from the monitor and looked again at Basil lying there. He was sizing up the external person whose interior he had been studying so intently. He looked back at the screen and then again at Basil as the disconnect began to register.

"Do you smoke?" he asked in a puzzled tone.

When he saw me, Basil started to cry. "Oh, Ces. I didn't do very well." He said it as though he'd flunked an exam, as though the whole thing was his fault. My first thought was to soothe him. "It's going to be okay. Don't worry," I purred. This had become my mantra. "Don't worry. You worry too much. There's nothing to worry about." A constant refrain since we'd married. But now the words were like ashes. Meaningless. I was stunned. Up until this point, I had not believed this would happen. I had been convinced that they would find nothing, that it had all been a big mistake. And since I didn't know what to say, I wanted to say what I'd been saying for so long.

"Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about." But "nothing" was turning out to be a great deal. There was no denying it anymore. Basil had heart disease; his condition was critical; his life—our lives—would never be the same.

Even Dr. Rukowski could see how stricken Basil was when he came by on his rounds later in the day. He sat on the side of the bed and put his hand on Basil's shoulder.

"You've had some pretty bad news," he said. "I know it's a shock, but you're in very good hands. We do this operation all the time; the survival rate is better than for gallbladder surgery."

Yes, I thought, but they don't saw through your breastbone to reach your gallbladder. They don't stop your heart.

The big question for us right then was "when?" It was Thursday. Dr. Rukowski said the medical staff would meet the next day to schedule surgeries for the following week. Basil had been confined to these sterile halls for nearly a week, and now the prospect of another week or ten days loomed. His hands were shaking and his chin quivered, but I could see him pulling himself together mentally.

I stayed for another hour or so, perched on the edge of a chair drawn up to the bed. I couldn't get up beside him because of the incision in his leg, which was to remain immobile for at least eight hours. There wasn't much to say; Basil was tired. I watched him eat his dinner: a listless arrangement of sliced turkey, mashed potatoes, and canned corn. On the tray table beside his meal were a pair of little orange gourds I'd brought him. They looked like miniature pumpkins—my forlorn attempt to bring something of the holiday spirit to him. I'd even painted faces on them with a black marker.

"Don't worry, there'll be lots more Halloweens," I said, and though it was certainly true, it still sounded lame. Basil smiled; there was nothing to say. Tomorrow we'd figure out how to prepare ourselves. Tonight his flattened spirit needed to rest.

I took the subway home and walked the last eight blocks to my house. It was early but already dark, a mild and misty evening, and my street was crowded with little groupings of parents trailing after their costumed toddlers. The carved faces of pumpkins flickered with grotesque cheerfulness from beside every front door. I walked quickly past them hoping I could make it to my house unnoticed, slip inside, and nurse my sorrows in the dark with a good stiff scotch. But no. All the neighbors were out on their front porches watching the

parade of children and handing out treats. Not since summer had there been this much street life.

When I reached our house, our neighbors, the Thompsons, Jamie and Avon, called out to me. This year for the first time they were taking in the spectacle together. Usually one of them would accompany their daughters, Islay and Faryn, on their trick-or-treating rounds, while the other stayed at home and doled out candy. But this year, at fourteen and twelve, the girls were old enough to go out alone, a big event but probably the last time that Islay would take part.

As I came up my front walk, she made her appearance on the porch of her house. She was a vision in white tulle, dressed in a wedding dress that her dad had spotted a few weeks earlier in someone's trash. Faryn, dolled up as a cheerleader complete with pom-poms and painted cheeks, acted as a sisterly sidekick. I stopped to admire their makeup and hairdos before they headed off into the darkness, wishing I'd had time to get my camera. We usually take pictures of them before they head out but not this year. I knew Basil would ask about their costumes when I called later to say goodnight.

It's hard to imagine better neighbors than the Thompsons. Ours is a modest downtown community where the houses are pushed together like cereal boxes on a shelf. The yards are small and privacy is a luxury. Somehow we have worked out a relationship with them that is friendly and supportive without being in any way intrusive. In summer, the sounds of little Faryn practicing her trumpet enliven the cocktail hour, and Avon gives us fair warning when Islay is having a sleepover. They feed our cat when we're away for the weekend. We look after their golden retriever, Lucy, and Bob the goldfish when they go home to Winnipeg in the summer. We exchange books and recipes and share muffins and organic

vegetables. And now, with Basil in the hospital, they wanted to help in any way they could.

Standing there in the dark and familiar intimacy of our neighboring front porches during a brief lull in the parade of trick-or-treaters, I brought them up-to-date on Basil's condition.

"It's been a long day," I concluded. "He's pretty bummed out, and to make matters worse, he's missing all this."

"We should send him something, Jamie," said Avon. "What hospital did you say he was in?"

I gave them his floor and room number, then went inside to get myself a drink. But instead of hiding away, I fed Harpo, turned out the lights, and went next door to join my other neighbors, Ian and Cathy, and their dogs, Geordie and Rocket, as they handed out treats. It turned out to be a fun evening after all, although not the same without Basil. Then, barely two hours after it had started, the festival was over, the streets silent once again.

After I had something to eat and watched a little TV, I called Basil to say good night. His voice, which I expected to be flat and sad, was crisp, even cheerful.

"I wish you could have seen the girls next door," I began.

"You mean the bride and her matron of good cheer?"

"Yes, but how . . ."

"They were just here."

"Who?"

"The Thompsons. Jamie and Avon. And the girls, all dressed up. They came to see me. They looked beautiful. I gave them those chocolates your mother brought."

I couldn't speak.

"Ces?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. You worry too much. Everything's going to be all right."

Avon's Chickpea-Dill Soup

According to Avon, this is her daughter Faryn's favorite soup. They make it all the time (and now, so do we), especially in the winter. Served with crusty bread, it's easy to throw together after work for a simple, nutritious one-dish meal.

- 3 to 4 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 15½-ounce can chickpeas (also known as garbanzo beans)
- 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes
- 1 small Parmesan cheese rind, plus 4 tablespoons grated
- ½ cup chopped fresh dill
- 4 cups water
- 1 cup cooked orecchiette or other small pasta

Sauté garlic in olive oil until just brown. Add chickpeas and stir-fry for about 30 seconds. Stir in tomatoes. Add cheese rind, dill, and water and simmer for 15 minutes.

Remove cheese rind and puree soup using a hand blender until the soup is still a bit chunky, with some of the tomatoes and chickpeas intact. Add the cooked pasta and heat through. Serve garnished with fresh dill and grated cheese. Serves 4.

8

Bedside Manners

Dr. Yeo leaned back against the wall and looked down at Basil. His legs were crossed at the ankles, and his tightly muscled arms and precisely manicured hands were folded across his chest. He was wearing a black V-necked sweater, beige chinos, and loafers, the sort of thing, I suppose, you'd expect a heart surgeon to wear to work on a Sunday afternoon.

Basil was dressed in a blue hospital gown over checked pajama bottoms, with black Converse sandals on his feet. We were sitting together in a pair of green vinyl armchairs at the end of a short corridor that branched off the main ward and ended in a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a panorama of downtown office buildings. Basil had staked out this spot as a place to get away from the close quarters of his semiprivate room. Every day, he spent hours there reading or just looking out the window, and by now the nurses knew where to direct his visitors.

Basil's surgery was tentatively scheduled for the following Tuesday. (The hospital operates on a triage system that sorts patients according to the seriousness of their condition. If cases more critical than Basil's turned up, he could be bumped.) Each Friday, the cardiac team met to draw up

schedules for the next week and to assign surgeons to patients. Basil had drawn this fit and compact Asian man, who looked impossibly young—in his early to midthirties—and who, like any good doctor, had come to meet and talk to the person whose chest he would be cutting open a few days hence—even if it was his day off.

Dr. Yeo began by delivering a terse and well-worn explanation of the procedure, how he would take a vein from Basil's leg and graft sections of it onto the blocked arteries, bypassing the clogged parts. He thankfully did not go into lavish detail about sawing through the breastbone and stopping the heart, things neither of us wanted to think about. His tone was so clinical and matter-of-fact that he might have been talking about tuning up a car. He said that he had looked at the ECG and angiogram results and that aside from the three major blockages Basil's arteries were in "so-so" condition.

"I've seen better, I've seen worse," he said, "but there is some narrowing in other arteries leading to your heart, which means you may continue to have angina pain after the surgery."

Basil said nothing during Dr. Yeo's speech, which was about as unvarnished as barn board, even when he trotted out the happy statistic about gallbladder operations. I could tell that Basil already knew as much as he wanted to know. He had no choice but to go through this; he had put himself in the hands of fate, and in a way the details were unimportant now—except one.

"You know," said Dr. Yeo, "that there's a problem with one of your valves."

Basil nodded. We did know. Dr. Rukowski had already told us that he had detected a faint heart murmur, indicating a slight leakage in one of Basil's heart valves, likely, he

explained, the result of rheumatic fever, which Basil (though he had no memory of it) must have had as a child.

"Dr. Rukowski thinks it's insignificant," Dr. Yeo paused here and frowned slightly, "but I'm not so sure. There's a good case to be made for replacing it while we're in there."

Basil's face went from ashen to white; he let out the breath he'd been holding in a rush, but he didn't say anything.

"This would add two or three hours to the surgery and there are other implications, which you should discuss with Dr. Rukowski."

"But if it's minor . . ." I piped up.

"It is. Whether we replace the valve now depends on how minor. If it looks like it'll be good for another ten years, then we won't do anything. But if it's only got two or three, we might as well take care of it while we're in there."

He then launched into a monologue about the respective merits of synthetic valves and pig's valves in a voice that seemed to grow increasingly animated as he contemplated the challenge of a more complex surgical procedure. Basil and I realized we were in the presence of an expert technician with the bedside manner of a plumber and the constitution of a professional athlete.

Open-heart surgery was looming as THE big event of Basil's life, but for this highly trained specialist, it was as routine as the four-minute mile would be to an Olympic runner. Dr. Yeo performed this five- to six-hour operation twice a day, five days a week. And even though his job calls for immense skill and endurance, to say nothing of the fact that lives are at stake, like an airline pilot on a trans-Atlantic run, he probably welcomed a little turbulence now and again.

The prospect of a valve replacement opened a whole new can of worms for Basil. Aside from the increased risk posed by a much longer operation, there was the issue of rejection

of the new valve. Powerful antirejection drugs would be added to the daily cocktail of medications he was already taking. (These included two beta-blockers for his high blood pressure, a cholesterol-lowering drug called Lipitor, a low-dose aspirin, and a blood thinner called Plavix.) If he had the valve surgery, the Plavix would be replaced by a much stronger blood thinner called Coumidan, which carries a high risk of internal bleeding. Users must undergo blood tests every two weeks to make sure their platelet levels are high enough. As well, mechanical valve technology is still iffy. Like car parts, they don't always function perfectly, and there have been well-publicized recalls on some models in recent years. Having your car recalled for a faulty steering mechanism is one thing, but replacing a malfunctioning heart valve is another matter altogether.

Dr. Rukowski seemed to feel that the best strategy was to postpone the valve surgery as long as possible, if only because the technology was certain to improve over the years. But the surgeon seemed to be itching to undertake the more immediate technical challenge.

"In any case, we'll have to wait until we get in there before we decide what to do," Dr. Yeo said almost cheerfully. "I just wanted you to know so you wouldn't wonder why you'd woken up with a brand new valve."

This last was meant to be a joke, but it went over like a used rubber glove. With that he glanced at his Rolex, shook Basil's hand, and left.

As the zero hour approached, Basil grew more and more anxious. At first I thought the fairly steady stream of visitors was a good thing; having to be sociable was bound to take his mind off himself. But sometimes the effort of making small talk added to his stress.

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to pop by to cheer him up: his sisters, Nora and Joanne, and their respective mates,

Dave and Bob; my sister Nicky and her husband, Neil; my brother, Oker; my mother; my cousin Ross and his wife, Suzanne; Basil's friends Colin and Laurie; Murray and Zoe; Tim, the writer; Bob from *Maclean's*; even Gillian, our dog walker, came to call. Many of these people visited several times. On the Saturday afternoon before Basil's surgery, I arrived at the hospital to find eight people lounging around in his makeshift drawing room at the end of the corridor by the windows, laughing and talking. Basil, who does more listening than talking even in conventional social settings, sat in his chair with his heart monitor pinned to his pajamas, looking as pink and serene as Buddha himself. But I could tell that his silence was like a low cloud covering on a summer day—big turbulence behind the fluffy stuff.

To add to the inclemency, his surgery was postponed. Tuesday came and went. By Wednesday afternoon, Basil felt like a thoroughbred that had been stuck in a starting gate for two days. When the nurse practitioner assured him that he was almost certain to go on Thursday, he reacted as though he'd finally won the lottery. The continued uncertainty had become a worse prospect than the surgery itself, and so he found himself longing for an inevitability that every fiber in his body dreaded.

When an old friend from out of town, whom Basil hadn't seen in years, called me at home to say he and his wife were in the city and wanted to drop by that evening, I told him it wouldn't be a good idea. Basil was very tired and he needed to rest for what we now felt certain would be a very big day. His friend Mark was insistent.

"We'll only stay for a few minutes," he declared over my objection. "We've come all this way."

"No," I repeated. "He's too tired." I knew this friend and, like many of Basil's friends, Mark was a talker. Basil is a superb listener. He claims he always learns from and is never

bored by the stories of others. He also never feels the need that most of us have to draw the conversation back to himself. This means he is something of a magnet for people who have a tendency to go on a bit more than I for one find tolerable. Mark and Basil had grown up together, and though their lives had taken very different trajectories, they had stayed in touch in a Christmas card, wedding, birth of a child kind of way. I knew that Mark would have many tales to tell about the doings of his children and his dogs, but listening is hard work, and it was time for Basil to rest.

Anyway, his insistence that he had to see Basil struck the wrong note with me. I suppose I was feeling the strain, too, and I kind of lost it.

"Listen," I said, "he's not going to die. He'll be here next month and the month after that and for years and years to come. Visit him then; right now he needs his rest a lot more than he needs to see anyone."

In the end, Mark and his wife stayed away, but when I went back to the hospital that evening, Basil told me that his cousin Kim and her partner, Dave, had phoned to say they were coming to see him. Although he and Kim had once been close, they'd lost touch over the years and a visit right then was more than even Basil felt he could manage. He tried to discourage them, but they were insistent. He even called his sister Nora and asked her to call and talk them out of coming. But by the time Nora phoned, they had already left.

We were huddled together on Basil's narrow bed trying to find something to watch on his minitelevision when we heard a small voice call out: "Knock, knock." The curtain slid open to reveal a couple in their mid- to late forties whom I had no recollection of ever having seen before.

"Kim, Dave," Basil croaked. "Cessie, you remember my cousin Kim—and Dave. Gee, I haven't seen you guys since the wedding. How are things?"

"Fine," said Kim.

"Fine," echoed Dave. That was all. They stood there looking at us. Waiting, though for what I don't know. Clearly these two weren't talkers, just the opposite; conversation would be a long, slow extraction.

An awkward silence followed as they smiled shyly and carefully avoided eye contact with either of us. There was, of course, nowhere for them to sit and nothing we could offer in the way of refreshment.

"So," Basil began. But before he could say anything, Kim pulled a card from the large black shoulder bag she was carrying. She handed it to Basil.

"It's from Joan," she murmured.

"Joan," said Basil. "How is Joan?" Joan, Kim's mother, had been married to Basil's cousin Lacky (which meant that Kim was actually Basil's first cousin once removed). Joan was a major source of guilt for Basil because she had had a cataract operation the previous year and despite his sister Nora's repeated reminders and his own good intentions, Basil had never quite got around to visiting Joan after her surgery.

"Oh well, you know . . ." said Kim. She didn't elaborate. Dave shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his bomber jacket. Basil looked at the card in his hand—a basket of spring flowers trailing ribbons held aloft by a pair of bluebirds. Under the picture the cheerful script read "Get well soon."

"That's nice. Of her to think of me, I mean."

"Read it," said Kim.

Basil opened the card. "Dear Basil," the note began in firm schoolteacherly handwriting. "I have been thinking about you a lot since I heard about your illness. Most of all I remember a small boy in the hospital with plaster casts on both his legs. I remember how brave he was in overcoming

that adversity, and I know he will overcome this one too. Love and best wishes, Joan."

When Basil looked up, tears had sprouted from the corners of his eyes and were trickling slowly down his face. Kim smiled a knowing smile. Dave looked down at his feet. I took the card from Basil's hand, read it, and pulled a tissue from the box on the bedside table.

Before anyone could say anything, Kim reached into her bag again and brought out a small square cookie tin that she opened and set on the bed at Basil's feet. In it were about a dozen fat, round cookies with the pattern of fork tines pressed into each one.

"Joan's peanut butter cookies," said Basil in an awed whisper that wouldn't have been out of place in church. Kim smiled and nodded. And then, as though he were offering a blessing, Basil picked up the tin and passed it around.

Cousin Joan's Peanut Butter Cookies

I'm not going to try to convince you that these are low-fat, but most of the fat in peanut butter cookies is the good kind. Be sure you use high-quality, unprocessed peanut butter. Most of the supermarket brands are loaded with trans fats (death in a jar, I call it) to prevent the oil from separating from the butter.

5 tablespoons butter
¾ cup chunky peanut butter
¾ cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons honey
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1½ cups unbleached flour
¾ teaspoon baking soda

Preheat oven to 375°F. In a mixing bowl, cream together the butter, peanut butter, sugar, and honey until light. Then beat in the egg and vanilla.

In another bowl, toss the flour with the baking soda. Slowly beat into the peanut butter mixture.

Form the batter into 1½-inch balls and place two inches apart on a cookie sheet. Flatten each cookie slightly with the tines of a fork. Bake until pale golden, 7 to 8 minutes. Cool on a wire rack. Makes 3 dozen.

9

'Til Death Do Us Part

"Great," said Leah. She immediately realized how flat this sounded considering the news we had just delivered. She tried again, her pretty features pulling themselves into a smile, and, though I didn't notice, so bright were the stars in my eyes, Basil saw the quiver of dismay tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You're getting married. That's . . . incredible." She was standing beside her boyfriend, who was sitting at a table in the crisp September sunshine signing copies of his novel. A small cluster of fans clutching books waited patiently for their turn to speak to him.

"Andrew," said Leah, pushing his shoulder with two fingers. "They're getting married. Mum and Basil are getting married." Without looking at us Andrew said, "Really. That's wonderful. Congratulations." He was smiling at a tall, dark-haired beauty who had just handed him a book to sign.

"I just loved this," said the woman, caressing the word *loved* as though it were a cat.

"Andrew," said Leah. He turned in his chair finally just as a small gray cloud passed in front of the sun, bringing with it a sudden chill. Then, as quickly as it came, it was gone. "Wow," said Andrew, shading his eyes against the glare.

We had driven to the annual literary festival in the pretty little town of Eden Mills that Sunday afternoon because I knew that's where I would find my eldest daughter, Leah. Her then-boyfriend, Andrew Pyper, had been asked to read from his first book, a collection of short stories called *Kiss Me*.

I wanted her to be the first to know. And since I had only proposed the night before (getting down on my knees in Basil's kitchen and sealing the deal with an elastic band, which I'd wrapped around the fourth finger on his left hand), the news was still as fresh as a load of wet cement.

Which is about how it went over with everyone we told, though I was too excited to notice at the time. They all—from my younger daughter, Meghan, to Basil's two older sisters to my mother and four siblings—swallowed hard before congratulating us, too polite to express their skepticism openly.

"So, like when? Have you set a date?" Leah asked as we strolled arm and arm through the village, crossing a flower bedecked bridge, the sound of bagpipes sighing and wailing from somewhere around the bend in the road.

"Thanksgiving weekend," I said. She dropped my arm.

"But that's," I could see her working it out in her head, "that's next month."

"I hate long engagements," I announced. "We want it to be very small, just family. No fuss." There was a long silence. The pipers came into view rounding a bend by the church and heading down the hill toward where we were stopped, now, on the bridge, looking down at the dark green stream flowing under it.

"You're sure, Mum?"

"Oh yes," I began, but my assurances were swallowed by the parade of wheezing kilts coming down the road.

Leah had good reason to ask. Our decision to get married was not the carefully considered strategy of two people who

had lived long enough to be wary of sudden romantic impulses. It *was* a sudden romantic impulse.

Basil and I had known each other for years, but we had only been dating for five months. And though we had spent a lot of time together in the previous weeks, we had never lived together and had no idea whether we would be compatible in all those banal but crucial day-after-day routines. We were an unlikely couple. At thirty-nine, Basil was seven years younger than I was; he had never been married or had children, while I was divorced with two daughters aged nineteen and twenty-two.

We knew little about one another, other than that the chemistry was very good. (We also knew from previous affairs that you can't always trust chemistry.) And although we both love books and long walks, good food and wine, antiques, and wood fires, we are very different temperamentally. I am impulsive, optimistic, gregarious, opinionated, self-centered, and restless. Basil is introverted, cautious, anxious, self-conscious, unselfish, and kind. It has taken me a long time to realize how fragile he is emotionally, though even then I could see that he was like a deer caught in headlights; my biggest worry now was that I was the oncoming car.

I fretted mostly about the difference in our ages, something I was very conscious of at the time, since Basil, despite his prematurely gray hair (he still insists it's chestnut brown), looks younger than his years, while I, well, I look my age. I thought everyone would notice, and I'm sure they do, but now I don't care since it has turned out to be the least important of our differences. Especially since my genetic legacy includes a grandmother who lived to be ninety-nine, while his fathers and uncles all died in their forties.

I think I grabbed onto Basil the way I did because I couldn't believe my good fortune, that this incredibly handsome, gentle, intelligent man had fallen for me. His certainty

that I was the one was fierce and unflinching. I, who in twelve years of single parenthood had had more than a few disillusioning experiences, knew that Basil was a man I could trust. What he sees in me, I really cannot say. Perhaps he mistook my restless spirit for fearlessness, my stubborn streak for steadiness. I have tried to be a rock to the ebb and flow of his insecurities, but I fear at times that maybe he was safer living a solitary life.

None of these thoughts, however, intruded during those dreamy fall days leading up to our wedding. We were completely occupied by the logistics of combining two households and oblivious to everything except the stars in our eyes. Nothing, it seemed, could penetrate our happiness.

The morning of our wedding day, we awoke under a crisp, untroubled sky—Basil at his house and I at mine; as befits connubial tradition, we did not see one another until just before the ceremony. While I was having a haircut and a manicure, Basil rode his bike over to Hart House for a short workout to try and calm his beating heart. We were to be married in a tiny chapel there, in the same ivy-covered, turreted stone edifice that houses the gym he had belonged to for twenty years, a building that exudes permanence and that has been a place of solace and stability for Basil.

Because it was such a beautiful day, he decided to wind up his workout with a short run around the playing field. As Basil tells it, he was jogging easily, trying to empty his mind, when a shadow fell across the grass in front of him. A rush of cool air ruffled the hair on the back of his head and made him slow to a walk and duck reflexively just as something large brushed lightly over his bent shoulders and lifted quickly away. When he straightened up, he saw a large white bird gliding low across the field, then slowly rising higher until it flew away over the bronze tops of the chestnut trees lining Harbord Street.

And even though Basil is the dean of all skeptics, he couldn't help but be shaken by the encounter with the white bird, coming as it did on this of all days. He decided to take it as a good omen, "touched by an angel" as he described it to me later. But I have never been as sure. Afterward, in a state of heightened anticipation, he went home to shower and dress before returning to Hart House a few hours later to meet his fate.

When I arrived about half an hour before the 2:00 P.M. service was set to begin, a small group of guests had already gathered on the steps outside. Sunshine, like a shower of diamonds, poured through the cool air onto the lawns and scarlet trees. A fresh breeze tousled the wall of Boston ivy framing the arched doorway. Basil was already there looking happy and nervous in a new blue suit. I went to him and helped pin a single white rose to his lapel; his hands were shaking too badly to manage himself.

"Are you okay?" I asked. He smiled and nodded, but I could see that the color was draining from his face. My brother-in-law, Neil, was running around taking pictures.

"Okay, you two, over here, look at me." Basil tried, but the required smile wouldn't come. He was turning a whiter shade of pale.

"Ces, I think I need a drink of water," he said in a hoarse whisper and fled into the building and down the stairs toward the locker rooms. I considered going after him or at least asking Neil to see if he was all right when he finally popped back out into the sunshine looking ready for anything.

It was his first anxiety attack, but then, the shortness of breath, palpitations, and cold sweat seemed like appropriate reactions to a life-changing event. A few years later, they would seem to signal the end of life itself.

Everything appeared set to go, so we trouped en masse into the building and down a long stone corridor. In the ante-

room to the chapel, a pianist was playing Debussy. Flowers sprawled brightly from urns flanking the doorway to the small room that had seating for only thirty people. The guests began taking their seats under the reverent eye of Reverend Armstrong. The wedding party—Basil, his cousin Barry, who was his best man, and me, with my bridesmaids, Leah and Meghan—stood waiting until everyone was seated so we could make our grand entrance. Nothing could stop us now.

Or so we thought. Just as the pianist was about to launch into "Here Comes the Bride," a whisper began to percolate through the little congregation, gradually gaining momentum until it reached our straining ears. The music slowed and muddled to a halt. "Where's Doris? Where's Doris?" was the now-audible murmur. Someone did a quick head count and, sure enough, there was an empty chair. One of the guests was missing, not a development worth holding up our nuptials except that Doris happened to be the mother of the bride. She had arrived safely with my youngest sister, Dori, we knew that, but now she had completely disappeared. Reverend Armstrong left her post to take part in the small conference that was brewing in the corridor outside the chapel.

Basil's sister Joanne was the last person to see her. "Your mother?" she volunteered. "She said she was going to the hospital. We offered to drive her, but she wanted to walk."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"She was trimming some flowers with a steak knife in the lounge and she cut herself," Joanne continued. "She didn't want us to tell you; she said she'd be right back and to carry on without her."

I bit my lip. It wouldn't do for me, the blushing bride, to accuse my seventy-eight-year-old mother of trying to deliberately sabotage the ceremony, but that's what I was thinking. I had known her for a long time and she had always had a knack for stealing the show, but this was unprecedented.

We decided it wouldn't be appropriate to go on without her, especially since no one had any idea how badly she was injured; she had simply marched off across the lawn, heading for the rushing traffic on University Avenue with a towel wrapped around her hand.

Reverend Armstrong went back inside and announced that there had been an unforeseen delay and would everyone please go back outside until the situation was cleared up. We all marched back out into the hard sunlight and milled about trying to decide where she might have gone—Women's College was the nearest hospital—and whether to send someone after her when a taxi suddenly pulled up in front of Hart House. My mother climbed out of the backseat looking surprised to see us all there. She smiled gaily and, like a diva greeting her fans, waved her injured hand. I could just make out a small, flesh-colored bandage encircling her ring finger.

Basil, by this time, was seething. His pallor had turned an ominous shade of pink. I wondered if he might lose his nerve altogether. But he didn't, and we all filed back into the building to try again. My mother's injury turned out to be minor, not worth stitching up, but it had taken its toll on our frayed nerves. As we stood together once again on the threshold of our future, the pianist abandoned his conventional repertoire and broke into a sparkling and spontaneous rendition of Cole Porter's "I Get a Kick Out of You."

And then we were wed.

My brand-new sister-in-law Nora had offered her house for the reception, and because the weather cooperated we were able to have champagne and informal toasts in her garden, which even this late in the season was alive with color. The catered dinner was simple and rich in flavor rather than

fat. I never did get the recipes for the chicken casserole and salad that we had. But this salad has always seemed the perfect wedding salad to me. Beautiful to look at, the ingredients are available year-round, and it's perfect for large groups because it will hold up for hours on a buffet table.

Endive and Avocado Salad

Rich and creamy avocados and crisp, slightly bitter endive are a marriage made in heaven. Sweet, white pears are the icing on the cake. You can peel them if you like, but we never do; the skin adds color and fiber.

1½ tablespoons coarse-grained Dijon mustard
¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
4 to 5 tablespoons good-quality olive oil
¾ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
4 heads of endive
4 ripe avocados, peeled and pitted
2 firm Bosc pears, sliced

Whisk together the mustard, lemon juice, olive oil, salt, and pepper to make a vinaigrette.

Remove half an inch from the stem of each endive and discard the core. Cut the rest into 1-inch chunks. Cut the avocados into large wedges or chunks. Peel and slice the pears. Toss the avocados, endive, and pears with the vinaigrette. Season to taste and serve at room temperature. Serves 6 to 8.

10

Operation Heart

"Take the elevator down to the third floor, turn left until you see a sign for the cardiac waiting room. Wait there until I come for you."

These were the instructions the orderly gave me as he helped Basil onto the gurney that was parked in the doorway of his room. I hesitated, reluctant to let my husband out of my sight. We were holding hands tightly; I ran my hand up his arm, trying to soothe him, as though he were a frightened horse, willing myself to be calm in the hope that some of it would flow into him. I could feel the faint beginnings of stubble on Basil's forearm. Earlier that morning, they had shaved every inch of his body—arms, legs, chest, groin, even his back, everywhere except the hair on his head.

The day before, he had visited the dentist on another floor to have his teeth cleaned. Any sign of gum disease and they would have postponed his surgery until it was cleared up. The mouth apparently has a direct conduit to the heart and more than one heart operation has been derailed because of an oral infection. For the rest of his life, Basil will have to take an antibiotic every time he sees the dentist.

Basil's gums and teeth were in perfect condition. It is a cruel genetic joke that his teeth are impeccably hard and

white and will likely survive another millennium, while his arteries are so plagued with defects that he's lucky to be alive.

"Where are you taking him?" I asked. Basil was quiet but shaky; they had given him a mild sedative earlier, but it was beginning to wear off. Still, the trembling in his hands was caused less by nerves than by the fact that it was now almost noon and he hadn't had anything to eat or drink since eight o'clock the night before.

"We're going to pre-op. Once he's settled, I'll come to get you and take you to him." The orderly anticipated my next question. "You'll be able to stay with him until he goes into surgery."

The surgical waiting room at Toronto General is a large, windowless room filled with sofas and chairs and tables laden with magazines. Most people who use the room will spend at least eight hours there (more if they're from out of town and choose to sleep over instead of going home and returning in the morning). A gallant though not particularly successful attempt has been made to soften the institutional feel. The furniture is more comfortable than standard hospital issue, the lighting warmed by the use of floor and table lamps. The room is randomly divided into seven or eight groupings of furniture, like a collection of small living rooms.

A large Italian family had taken over one corner of the waiting room. About a dozen adults and children sat reading or chatting with an elegant, well-dressed woman in her late fifties who was clearly at the center of the gathering. The group looked very much at home, as though their vigil had been going on for days, not a matter of hours. From time to time, one or two of them would get up, kiss the matriarch in sympathy, and leave, soon to replaced by other family members or friends who embraced her before taking their places in the circle of chairs. An atmosphere of reverent anticipation prevailed.

Other smaller groupings were scattered about the room, all of them dominated by an older woman—older than I am by ten or fifteen years and larger, usually, by thirty or forty pounds. One very fat woman had an oxygen tank at her side. Every so often, her daughter would go out and come back with something for her to eat, usually a salad in a clear plastic container. The woman would sigh, eat it, then resume staring off into space.

The communal atmosphere made me self-conscious. It had never occurred to me to ask anyone to wait with me through Basil's operation, and no one in my family had offered. My daughter Leah was living in London at the time, and Meghan was coming the next day from Ottawa to stay with me. In fact, I had thought I would prefer to sit it out alone, but now, as I faced the long day ahead, the prospect seemed less attractive.

I spotted a small group of empty chairs along the far wall and settled in with a magazine that I pretended to read until the orderly came for me about half an hour later. He took me through a door and up a flight of stairs, along an endless corridor, and into a long room with about eight beds lined up along the walls. It reminded me of the kind of hospital ward you might see in old British movies. Basil was on the right-hand side in a bed nearest the door I had entered from. Each of the other beds held a man—I don't remember seeing any women. One family member sat on a stool at each bedside. Soothing whispers drifted through an atmosphere that was thick with fearful resignation. This was it, no going back now.

The daughter of the woman with the oxygen tank was there with a man who must have been her father. So was Basil's most recent roommate, a soft-spoken man from Thunder Bay who faced a liver transplant once his leaky heart valve was fixed. I smiled at his wife and wished them luck.

At the far end of the room was another door beyond which lay the operating rooms where even now others like Basil and these men were undergoing surgery. I wasn't quite prepared for the scale of what was going on. It was like a factory for broken hearts; I thought of all those people sitting downstairs while their loved ones waited like airplanes lining up for takeoff at a busy airport. Seeing all these others going through a variation of the same drama that was playing out in our own lives was a chastening experience. And to think that variations on this same scene played out day after day, week after week. I didn't know whether to be reassured or terrified.

An elderly man dressed in surgical greens wandered past and gave Basil an exaggerated thumbs-up before pulling up a chair beside a patient on the other side of the room. Basil told me he was a volunteer whose job it was to chat with the patients, answer their questions, and reassure them in whatever way he could. Before my arrival, the man had plunked himself down beside Basil and explained that he had had bypass surgery himself about ten years earlier. He decided to become a volunteer after taking early retirement, though not because of his heart, he was careful to explain. It was his back. It seems he had been a funeral director and, he told an astonished Basil, lifting those bodies day after day finally did him in. It made us wonder if his presence was intended more as comic relief than as a palliative.

Just then the door at the end of the room opened and two women wearing greens, with surgical masks hanging untied around their necks, walked over to us. They introduced themselves as members of the team that would be assisting Dr. Yeo. They seemed so young and cheerful, as though they had just spent the morning on a flight to Winnipeg and were looking forward to an uneventful trip back in the afternoon. It was they who explained to us that at this hospital alone as

many as forty open-heart surgeries are performed each week. The first group goes under the knife at 8:00 A.M., and if all goes well they are out by 1:30. The second shift (Basil's on this day) starts at 2:00, after the surgeon has taken a half-hour break for lunch.

It was now about 1:15.

"Dr. Yeo is just closing now," one of the women chirped, "and after he's had a sandwich and a little break, you're up."

They hurried off.

Basil was very quiet.

"Are you okay?" Stupid question, but it was hard to think of what to say.

"No," he whispered. "I'm scared shitless." He was twisting my fingers in his. "My mouth is very dry."

A nurse came over and asked if he'd like some crushed ice. He nodded, grateful, and she spooned a few chips into his mouth from a Styrofoam cup. Then she offered him a sedative and his chin bobbed even more enthusiastically. She slipped two tiny pills under his tongue. "Just let them dissolve. They should take effect in five or ten minutes."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Basil was visibly calmer. He began to talk, not the dreaded "If anything should happen to me" speech or even last-minute proclamations of undying love. Instead, he started going on and on about the drugs.

"I feel really, really . . . I don't know. Great. I feel great," he said in an awed voice. "What was that stuff?"

"I don't know, but I wish they'd offer me some."

Then, as if out of nowhere, an orderly appeared. I kissed Basil quickly and watched as they wheeled his bed toward the waiting doors. He was facing me as they pulled him away and I waved, but he didn't wave back. As I turned to leave, this fact made my heart sink—until I remembered that he wasn't wearing his glasses and from across the room I would

have looked like a wobbly blur. This realization cheered me a little as I steeled myself for the long wait ahead.

I made my way back to the surgical waiting room, getting lost twice in the maze of corridors and stairwells, to find that my vigil would not be solitary after all. Basil's sisters, Nora and Joanne, were sitting side by side against one wall looking uncharacteristically solemn. The sly drollery with which both of them normally greeted the world was replaced with a tight-lipped reticence. We embraced briefly, and I sat down and filled them in.

Basil and his two older sisters make up the bare bones of a small but tight family unit that includes Nora and her partner, Dave, and Joanne, her husband Bob, and their two teenage sons, Ian and Paul. The three siblings are close in age, separated by only five years; all three live in or near Toronto, but what really holds them together is the fact that their parents are no longer living. Like many families, their respective lives have diverged in many ways, but the three Guinanes have clung to the overturned canoe of their family life with the dedication of three men in a tub.

When a colleague of mine, whose wife grew up with Basil and his sisters in Toronto's working class Parkdale neighborhood, heard that we were getting married, he raised his eyebrows and asked me how the "sisters" were taking the news that their "baby brother" was leaving the nest. It took me awhile to fully grasp the eaglelike fierceness with which both of them watch over Basil. Although they have never said so, I realize now that they sized me up early on and, for better or for worse, decided to share the mantle of caring for their brother. "This side up," "Handle with care" were the unspoken instructions that came with the package. It's a responsibility that, five years into our marriage, has turned out to be bigger than I'd anticipated. And, though this was

not the time to dwell on it, the nagging notion that somehow I had let my end down only added to my anxiety.

But they are a formidable pair, and I am grateful that they have turned out to be allies, not rivals, as can so often happen. Although she has never had children, Nora, the eldest, is the self-appointed matriarch, a role that is jokingly alluded to at family dinners but one that she takes very seriously. It is Nora who calls to remind Basil that it is his cousin Barry's birthday and Nora who grills her nephews about their marks and Nora who attends the funerals of distant relatives.

Joanne, the middle child, is the peacemaker, the mediator, the one who, at least on the surface, is easygoing and even-tempered with a wicked sense of humor that she uses to deflect whatever simmering tensions might lurk under the surface of the family's frequent gatherings.

They had both taken the afternoon off work to be there, a trial in particular for Nora, who seldom visits people in the hospital because of a squeamishness that verges on phobia. She looked drawn and uncomfortable. Joanne's hands were shaking as she wrestled with the lid of her take-out coffee.

There wasn't much to say; small talk seemed inappropriate, and although we were armed with lots of books and magazines, there were so many distractions that trying to read was futile. Because we were having difficulty concentrating, watching the minidramas unfolding around us turned out to be a better way to pass the time. Two women volunteers wearing pink lab coats sat at a table just inside the entrance to the waiting room. When family members or friends entered the room, they signed a clipboard and gave the name of the patient they were waiting for. There was a large, round clock hanging on the wall above where the women sat. At ten minutes past 2:00, one of them called out the name of the large Italian family in the corner. A collective gasp issued

from where they were sitting. The attractive older woman stood and, urged on by her family members, went to the doorway where a tall man in surgical greens was waiting. He led her out into the hall and a brief conference ensued during which she covered her mouth with her hands and nodded intently. A few moments later, she returned to her family members, who gathered around her. The woman was weeping and smiling at the same time.

She resumed her place, and another hour passed before the volunteer called the woman's name again. This time, she and two of her companions followed an orderly out of the waiting room. As time went on, I began to see a pattern developing. After each operation ended, the surgeon would make a brief appearance to speak to the family and tell them how things went. Almost without exception, the news appeared to be good, and the mood in the room would lift as though someone had opened a window. Then, an hour or so after the conference with the surgeon, a nurse would appear and usher the family members to the intensive care unit.

At about 4:30, Joanne announced that she was going for a walk. Nora and I both knew she was going out for a cigarette, and, inappropriate as it sounds, I felt a vague longing, like the memory of a kiss. Oh, for the small, lost consolation of nicotine. She offered to pick up something to eat while she was out, but none of us felt hungry. Just as she was about to leave, one of the women on Basil's surgical team appeared and came to sit down beside us. She could see the alarm in my eyes and put a reassuring hand on my knee.

"It's okay. Everything's fine. I just wanted to bring you up-to-date on your husband." She told us that Basil was doing well. Dr. Yeo had removed a vein from his left leg and was in the process of grafting sections of it onto the blocked arteries. "It looks like he'll probably do five grafts."

At this, the previously cool and collected Joanne's eyes filled with tears. "Five," she said in a strangled whisper. "I thought he had three blockages."

"It's all right," the woman said. "There are three major arteries leading to the heart. Each one can have more than one blockage . . . in Basil's case, three grafts is the minimum. Don't worry. The good news is, they won't be replacing the valve."

"How much longer?" I wanted to know.

The nurse looked at her watch. "Another two-and-a-half hours. He should be out by seven." With that, she smiled a reassuring, airline hostess smile and left.

Joanne followed her out and returned twenty minutes later with two brown paper bags, one of which held three cups of strong, milky coffee. She held the second bag out to us. "Come on," she said. "You have to eat something."

In it were half a dozen assorted donuts. Suddenly I was ravenous. I reached in and pulled out a walnut cruller covered in a sugary glaze. It was utterly delicious, and it was all I could do not to devour it in three or four bites. I don't know when I'd last eaten a donut, certainly not since Basil and I had been married. They were definitely one of the forbidden foods at our house. As soon as I finished, as I was licking the icing from my fingers, I was consumed with guilt. How could I eat anything at a time like this? Let alone something as heart-stopping as a fatty, deep-fried donut? I thought of poor Basil gratefully sucking on a few chips of ice, and I was filled with shame.

The Italian woman returned to her waiting family. She looked excited and relieved and the atmosphere in their little encampment turned almost celebratory. She and one of her sisters evidently planned to stay the night. Someone had brought them pillows and blankets and food. I marveled at the intensity with which they rallied to their crisis. I lived

only a fifteen-minute cab ride from the hospital, so I had no intention of sleeping in a chair under fluorescent lights and neither did Nora or Joanne. But I felt another prickle of shame.

The afternoon dragged into evening. We were getting tired but tense, because our wait would soon be over. One by one, the surgeons appeared and called to one of the family groups around us. One by one, haggard and relieved relatives were led away down the long corridor. The wife of Basil's roommate came over with tears in her eyes to tell me that her man had made it. Because of his liver cancer, his had been a high-risk surgery. She wished me luck and left to go to him.

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was 7:30. Six hours had passed since I had waved good-bye to Basil. What was taking so long? Another half hour slogged by, and as it did a small fist of fear pushed against my ribs. By 8:00, we were the only people left in the room, other than the Italian family, who had laid out an astonishing picnic on the coffee table and were digging in with enviable zeal.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I walked over to the volunteer at the desk: "Excuse me, but my husband's operation seems to be taking an awfully long time." You would have thought I was asking for the time of day or where the washrooms were.

"His name?"

"Guinane, Basil Guinane."

"Just a moment." She picked up the phone and spoke quickly. "Someone will be here in a moment."

Even though it was late, I was expecting Dr. Yeo to appear and fill us in on how the surgery had gone. But after an interminable stretch, another green-clad hospital person whom we hadn't seen before appeared and motioned us to follow. I was too terrified to ask who she was. We jumped to our feet and went after her, down the corridor, through a

door, up a flight of stairs, through another door, along another endless corridor, a dim, dark tunnel to what I felt was certain catastrophe. We walked quickly in single file, the woman in green in front, then me, then Nora and Joanne. No one said a word, but my mind was galloping out of control.

Something had gone wrong. That's why Dr. Yeo hadn't come to speak to us. That's why this was taking so much longer than it should have. I looked at my watch. Nine o'clock. Panic lurched inside me like a runaway horse. Every nerve in my body vibrated and yet I was numb with terror, breathless with dread. We turned left past a bank of elevators and pushed through a pair of swinging doors into a dimly lit ward. The woman in green slowed by the nurse's station and I heard her say Basil's name in a hushed voice. She turned to me and pointed to an alcove lit with an eerie blue-green light coming from a bank of monitors hanging on the ceiling above a bed.

In the bed was Basil. I stood there. A motherly looking, brown-skinned woman appeared at my side. She smiled a beatific smile.

"My name is Lolita," she said. "I'm Basil's nurse." Standing there, stiff with fear, I shared a silent chuckle with Basil over the woman's name. Lolita, the embodiment of wholesome reassurance, said, "It's all right. You can go to him."

"He's okay?" I nearly choked on the words.

"Yes, he's fine. He won't wake up for a few more hours, but he did just fine."

I went to Basil's side; his breath was coming in jerky snores. I touched his white, cold hand and, as I did, relief like a warm blanket settled over me and I started to cry. Joanne came to stand behind me, and Nora, worried that she might faint, stayed back in the hallway. It wasn't a pretty sight. Basil was still on a respirator and a fat, plastic tube protruded from his open mouth. There were tubes everywhere, in his

neck and arms, and a particularly ominous one trailing from under a large bandaged area on his chest to a bucket-sized cylinder on the floor beside the bed. His skin was grayish, except for the bruising around his neck. Flecks of dried blood clung to his shoulders.

Gurgling sounds came from the breathing tube and sharp rhythmic beeps from the bank of monitors on the wall above his head. Lolita had resumed her post on a stool pulled up to a small desk at the foot of the bed. For the next twelve hours, she would watch and record Basil's vital signs, and if she took a break, someone would take her place on the stool. At the end of Lolita's shift, another intensive-care nurse would take over for a second twelve-hour shift, and so on for forty-eight hours until he was deemed stable enough to be transferred to a room.

I turned to Lolita. "We were so worried. Why did it take so long? Dr. Yeo . . ."

"Dr. Yeo is still in surgery. An emergency came in around 7:00. But you can speak to him tomorrow."

That explained why he hadn't come to the waiting room. And then, in the confusion of the regular shift change at 8:00 P.M., no one had thought to come and tell us that Basil was out of surgery. We had sat there in an agony of anticipation for almost two hours. All I could think of, though, was the surgeon. Three bypass operations in one day. If there were an Olympics for heart surgery, surely he'd be on the team.

After Nora and Joanne left, I sat with Basil, wondering if I should stay after all, curl up on one of the sofas downstairs so that I could be there when he came out of the anesthetic.

"Where do you live?" Lolita asked. I told her.

"Go home. He won't wake up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Get some sleep and come back tomorrow." She saw me hesitate.

"Here," she jotted a phone number down on a slip of paper. "If you wake in the night, call me." I took the paper

and walked out onto University Avenue. The evening was cold and clear. A stream of car lights swirled around the uplit facade of the legislative buildings at Queen's Park. Horns honked, a siren wailed. I zipped up my jacket and shoved my hands into the pockets and headed for the yellow glow of the subway station half a block away. On the way, I looked up at the dark roof of the city sky. I couldn't see any stars, but they were there. I knew that much for sure.

As I was marching down the hospital corridor that night toward what I imagined was devastating news, the walnut cruller I had eaten hours earlier weighed heavily in my gut and on my conscience. And as I prepared to confront my worst fears, I made a little bargain with whoever is in charge of these things. *No more donuts*, I promised. *Just make everything all right and I'll never eat another donut again.*

Well, I've stuck to my end of the deal, and I've yet to eat a donut. (Not even when the first Krispy Kreme outlet opened in Toronto and they sent a truckload of boxes to *The Globe* for us to try.)

Although donuts are a banned substance forever, walnuts are definitely on our A-list of things to eat. I know it's not as convenient as slipping into a donut shop, but here are two ways to serve them that are just as soul satisfying as killer deep-fried dough.

Date and Walnut Loaf

Basil often talks about the date-nut loaf his mother used to make. He says that my version is almost as good. I thought

it would be a welcome hospital treat—comforting, sweet, and full of good things. Walnuts are rich in cholesterol-lowering omega-3 fatty acids and dates are high in fiber and vitamin B. We always have ground flaxseed in the fridge because of its whopping omega-3 content—that's the stuff that breaks up the bad (LDL) cholesterol. This easy loaf stays moist for days, and the rum gives it grown-up kick. I once made it with Cointreau because that was all I had, and the touch of orange was lovely with the dates and nuts.

1 cup roughly chopped dates
¾ cup roughly chopped walnuts
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon kosher salt
¾ cup boiling water
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup sugar
1½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon ground flaxseed (optional)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 eggs
1 teaspoon dark rum or Cognac (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly grease an 8½-by-4½-inch loaf pan. Mix the dates, walnuts, baking soda, baking powder, and salt in a medium-sized bowl. Then stir in the boiling water and the butter. Let stand for 20 minutes.

Sift the sugar and the flour together into a smaller bowl. Lightly whisk the vanilla, eggs, and rum together in a large mixing bowl. Stir the flour, sugar, and flaxseed into the egg mixture in three additions. Fold in the date and nut mixture, making sure the ingredients are well combined. The final mixture will be thick.

Pour the batter into the greased loaf pan and bake for about 1 hour. Check with a cake tester or skewer after about 50 minutes. Don't worry if little pieces of the dates and some moisture stick to the tester. It's better to take it out a little earlier than to risk overcooking the loaf.

Remove from oven and let stand for 10 minutes before removing from the pan.

Rosemary Sugared Walnuts

This snack is utterly addictive. Fleur de sel, the prized and costly sea salt from Brittany, is the secret ingredient. Wrapped up in a pretty box, these make an original and thoughtful hostess gift. Make sure you use only the freshest walnuts; it's best to buy them in a bulk-food store that has a high turnover. They go rancid very quickly and should always be stored in the refrigerator.

2 cups walnut halves
⅓ cup granulated sugar
1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
1 teaspoon fleur de sel or coarse sea salt

Bring a pot of water to a boil. Add walnuts and cook for 3 minutes. Drain and pat dry.

Combine walnuts with sugar in a heavy saucepan and cook on medium-high heat for 5 to 8 minutes or until the sugar melts, browns, and coats the nuts. Stir in the rosemary and the salt.

Spread the nuts as quickly as you can on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake in a 350°F oven for 10 minutes. Cool and serve.

Tip

Buy a bottle of good-quality walnut oil and use it instead of olive oil in salad dressings. Mixed with a little lemon juice and salt, it will transform ho-hum greens into a delicately flavored delight.

Here's an easy way to remember which cholesterol is the good kind to have and which is the bad: LDL (lousy), HDL (healthy).

11

Out of the Woods

The surgery went well, Dr. Yeo told me early the next morning. I was at the hospital by 9:00 A.M., and he was just finishing his rounds before going into surgery for another day. He explained that he had completed four grafts on Basil's beleaguered arteries: three used chunks of the artery from Basil's leg, the fourth was fashioned from a chest artery. That he was able to make use of a chest artery, I later learned, was good news because these are thicker and would not clog up again as quickly (a prospect neither of us could bear to entertain right then). The leaky valve turned out to be minor (and it improved dramatically in the ensuing months, probably because of the increased blood flow to Basil's heart).

Basil's relief was boundless. Indeed, the first question he asked when he regained consciousness following the operation was "Did they replace the valve?" When I called Lolita at 3:00 A.M. to find out how he was, she carried the phone to his bedside, and his first words to me were "They didn't replace the valve." His voice was thick and hoarse but strong. Clearly, this was a major preoccupation.

"I love you," I said. "Go to sleep."

"You too."

He had been through more than either of us realized at the time. It wasn't until months later as I was reading an article about bypass surgery that I fully understood the enormity of the physical ordeal. The process of stopping a patient's heart and keeping him or her alive on a heart-lung machine is a much more complicated process than I had really considered. To prepare for the transition from flesh and blood to machine, the heart is stopped by flooding it with ice-cold fluids containing lots of potassium, an element that stops muscle contraction. To prime the machine, an electrolyte solution is circulated through it. Then the patient's blood is rerouted so that it begins pumping through the machine while oxygen is percolated into it through sheets of plastic that act as artificial lungs.

The machine cools the blood to about 82 degrees Fahrenheit, and the operation can begin. Relatively speaking, the surgery itself is a piece of cake, the techniques perfected by the skilled technicians. The problems that sometimes arise are caused by the heart-lung machine. Blood going through the machine gets "roughed up," which damages the white blood cells that protect against infection. As well, the roughed-up cells can inflame the patient's lungs. More damage is caused by small clots that form around the oxygenated blood cells, which can block capillaries in the lungs, the retina, and the brain, creating a small risk of stroke. As many as half of patients develop a condition known as "pump head" following bypass surgery, a not very elegant name for cognitive difficulties such as memory loss and inability to concentrate or to perform simple calculations. These faculties usually return to normal in the weeks and months following surgery. But they are believed to contribute significantly to depression, a condition that plagues a large number of recovering heart patients.

All this I was blissfully unaware of at the time of Basil's surgery. Fortunately, he did not exhibit any of the physical symptoms, but I sometimes contemplate how confusing and disturbing it would have been if he had. Especially since no one had ever explained to us just how much could go wrong.

That morning, after talking to Dr. Yeo and spending a brief time with Basil, I rushed to my office to meet my daughter Meghan, who was taking a cab there from the train station. I planned to clear up a few odds and ends at work and then the two of us would go back to the hospital.

When Meghan had proposed that she take time off work to come to Toronto from Ottawa to be with me following Basil's surgery, my first reaction was to discourage her. The last thing I needed was the additional burden of motherhood. Though by then she was an independent young woman of twenty-four who had been living on her own for about two years, it was the sometimes sullen adolescent who was stuck in my short-term parenting memory. I also didn't know how Basil would feel about having her see him at his nadir. She is *my* daughter after all, and although Basil and Meghan had always liked one another, the truth is that they hadn't known one another very long.

In the end, I let her come. I hadn't seen her in months and she so wanted to be there for me, especially since her sister Leah was living in England at the time. This was Meg's chance to be the grown-up, the big sister. When I met her at *The Globe*'s reception area, she radiated seriousness and concern. She put her bags down and wrapped her long thin arms around me in a protective hug.

Through some luck of the genetic draw, Meghan is built like a thoroughbred filly. She certainly didn't inherit her five-foot-eight, 115-pound frame from my side of the family. And

the women on her father's side are, well, built close to the ground.

Unlike her sister Leah and me, who do constant battle with extra poundage, Meg has always had difficulty keeping weight on. Her adolescence was a series of diet and exercise programs designed to bulk up her bony arms and legs, which she was then intensely self-conscious about. The truth is, she has the body (and the face) of a supermodel, and while she was bemoaning her skinniness, the rest of us were nauseated with envy.

Her thinness can, in part, be attributed to a birdlike appetite and a tendency to crave fruits and vegetables rather than meat and carbs. She is the only teenager I have ever known who loathed French fries. As a small child, she ordered salads when the family went to McDonald's. Like her father, who is also thin, Meghan has never shown much interest in food. She doesn't really experience hunger as a craving. Instead, she gets jittery and irritable when her blood sugar is low, a signal that she'd better eat something soon. Of course, we thought she might be anorexic, but even her doctor ruled that out. Meghan is perfectly healthy; she just doesn't eat much. As a result, she has never really made it past the shake-and-bake stage of cooking—or so I thought.

"How is your father?" I asked as we took the escalator up to my office. Meg had spent the night with my ex-husband, Jim, and her stepmother, Mary Jane, before catching the train to Toronto.

"He's fine," she said. "He said to wish Basil well for him."

"And Mary Jane?"

Meg scrunched her face and laughed. "I know this sounds terrible, but I think she's a tiny bit jealous."

"Jealous?"

"You know. It's her inner nurse. She'd love to have a recovering surgical patient around the house. She's been calling me every day to get all the details."

Over the last seventeen years, the girls' father and I have managed to cobble together a tenuous friendship from the detritus of our marriage. No small credit goes to Mary Jane, whom Jim married when the girls were ten and twelve. Meghan lived with them and Leah lived with me during the turbulent teen years, and long parental telephone conferences were weekly, sometimes daily events.

"Well, I hope your inner nurse is feeling strong because Basil is pretty weak right now."

"Mum, I'm here to help. I won't be in the way." There was the faintest shimmer of a whine in her voice. I did a mental cringe. Just as long as *her* inner child stays where it is, I thought. She gave me a look that was almost defiant, but her tone was bright. "Tell you what. I'll make dinner tonight. How about that?"

I raised my eyebrows ever so slightly, then agreed. Meals were the last thing on my mind right now. It would give her something to do.

That morning when I had seen him, Basil had looked a little like a large potato sprouting tubes. By noon the day after his surgery, most of them were gone. The big fat respirator tube, of course, had come out of his mouth within hours, and he was breathing easily on his own. A jagged wire in his neck and the scary-looking hose protruding from the bandage on his chest that had been emptying blood-tinged fluid into the cylinder by the bed were gone, too. The nurse on duty

explained that it had been draining fluid from around his heart and its removal was a big step. He still had three tubes protruding from his chest that would stay in for several more days, apparently in case they had to go back in for any reason. He had IVs in his hands and arms delivering fluids and medication, including heavy-duty painkillers, to his bloodstream. Little white disks were stuck all over his chest around the angry red incision about eight inches long that ran from the base of his throat to the bottom of his sternum. Everyone who saw it in the weeks that followed expressed admiration for Dr. Yeo's handiwork, saying the scar would hardly be visible in a few years time.

Right then, though, it was a vivid and shocking testimony to the violence that had been done to Basil's body. His breastbone had been sawn in half lengthwise and his rib cage peeled back to reveal his heart. Afterwards, the breastbone was wired back together; it would take a year for it to fully heal but much longer for Basil to lose the intense feelings of fragility and vulnerability in that part of his body. Now that he has recovered, a familiar pose has him standing in thought or conversation with his right hand, fingers splayed, pressing against the upper part of his chest. The gesture is reminiscent of the way a pregnant woman might protectively cradle her swelling belly.

But the longest incision on his body ran from the inside of his left ankle to his upper thigh.

"It hurts like hell," he said.

"Can I see?"

Basil nodded, and I lifted the edge of the sheet to uncover his foot and ankle. Meghan, who had stayed in the background while I sat gingerly on the edge of Basil's bed, stepped forward now to have a look.

"I thought you had heart surgery," she said.

"They took a vein out of his leg to graft onto his blocked arteries," I explained.

"Cool."

"Ah me wee bairn," Basil crooned hoarsely. "Angel of mercy ye are." You could see a chuckle rising in his throat; he stopped it in time, then swallowed carefully. "Don't make me laugh, lass. The pain is terrible."

Even though he'd been cut open like a chicken, Basil's biggest complaint that first morning was his sore throat and a raging thirst. They let him suck ice chips through a straw, but they were introducing fluids very slowly. Considering what he'd been through, he was in remarkably good spirits, elated almost. His sheer relief at being alive had not yet given way to the monumental task ahead. (The Percodan was doing its work as well.) He joked with Meghan and me and with Lolita's successor, who turned out to be a graduate of the nursing program at Humber College. His world, which had already been reduced to less than a city block, now consisted of about 150 square feet. And he was only too happy to lie there and let the machines and the nurses take care of him.

It was not to be. Soon after Meg and I arrived, a burly male orderly came in. "Okay. I want you to swing your legs over here and sit on the edge of the bed for a few minutes."

Basil looked at him in disbelief.

"It's all right. I'll help you."

He might as well have suggested they go for a walk on the moon. "You want me to move?" Basil said.

"That's right. Just sit up for a few minutes. And if you're feeling strong, you can try standing up."

With the orderly's help and encouragement from Meg and me, Basil managed this daunting maneuver. Afterwards, he sank back against the raised head of the bed and closed his eyes, exhausted. That was Meg's cue.

"Mum, I'm going to go now. I'll pick up the dog, and I'll see you later. Stay as long as you need to." She gave me the look. "I mean it."

I settled in on a straight-backed chair that someone had found for me and tried to read the book I'd brought, while Basil dozed fitfully. There wouldn't have been much chance for him to sleep even if he'd been able to. It was like summer camp—every half hour or so someone else would come by with another little project for him. Coughing to keep his lungs clear was the worst. The nurse provided him with a large pink bedsheet that had been folded into a thick cushion secured with masking tape. She showed Basil how to hold it against his chest for support during his hourly coughing sessions.

He complained of nausea that first day—apparently the result of the morphine he was getting intravenously. Because they didn't want to decrease the dosage, he was given Gravol to settle his stomach. This made him even groggier. And still the probing and prodding continued: his blood pressure, his temperature, adjustments to his IVs. I wished they would leave him alone. Then his nurse appeared with what looked like a child's toy, a clear blue plastic tube about eight inches long mounted on a flat stand with a flexible plastic hose attached at the base. Inside the tube was a tiny plastic ball, like a miniature Ping Pong ball. She demonstrated, putting the hose in her mouth and inhaling deeply. This made the little ball flutter lightly up inside the tube. The device whistled cheerfully each time she sucked in on it. The point, she explained, was to get the ball up to the top of the tube and hold it there for as long as possible.

Basil placed the end of the hose in his mouth and breathed in. The little ball sputtered about an inch and dropped back with a high-pitched sigh. He tried again, and it bounced a fraction of an inch higher before sinking like a stone.

"That's okay. Just try and hold it there for a few seconds."

He tried again and managed to hold the fluttering ball aloft briefly. But the effort was exhausting.

"Keep it right beside you," the nurse said as she closed Basil's fist around the device. "I want you to repeat the exercise at least twice every hour." She looked at me. "You remind him."

After she'd gone back to her charts and Basil had dozed off again, I picked up the breathing toy, stuck the hose in my mouth and pulled on it hard. The ball danced to the top of the tube. Still, it was surprisingly difficult. Poor Basil. He was as weak as a kitten. Looking down at him, watching the shallow rise and fall of his chest, I was frightened by how tenuous each breath seemed and how little—a blue plastic toy—stood between him and nothing at all.

When he woke up a little later, he reached for the device and tried again, a little better this time. And he didn't complain, though the effort cost him so much and the results were not immediately encouraging. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who used to be able to run five kilometers and hardly break into a sweat. You could see him focusing what energy he had on this small but challenging task. If learning to breathe again was like a child's first steps, well then, he was going to get better—one goddamn breath at a time.

It was after 6:00 by the time I got home, hurrying because I felt I had neglected Meghan. As I climbed the steps to the front door, I could hear the unfamiliar roar of a vacuum cleaner. The dog started barking as I let myself in, adding to the din that was heightened by the mounting crescendo of the soundtrack from *Evita* playing on the stereo.

Meg flipped the vacuum cleaner off when she realized I was there, but she continued to sing. "Don't Cry for Me Argentina/The truth is I never left you." Harpo's barking

began to escalate until he threw his head back and launched into a full-throated howl. "Yip, yip, oooh ooohoo." I couldn't help it. I unbuttoned my coat, spread my arms wide, and joined in. "All through my wild days/My mad existence."

When the song ended, we collapsed on the sofa, the dog jumping all over us; we were laughing like idiots.

"Remember when we were kids, Mum? How much we loved that tape. How you played it over and over in the car, and we knew all the words?"

I did remember. What I didn't recall was the smell of lemon oil mixed with ammonia that was filling the house.

"What's that smell?"

"Oh, I washed the kitchen floor for you and polished the furniture. I'm almost finished. But let's have a drink." She led me into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of white wine from the fridge along with a white plate with a pretty array of what looked like pale green and pink sandwich cookies.

"Smoked salmon and cucumber," Meghan announced.

"They're beautiful." I looked at her standing there, triumphant, her long hair piled on the back of her head in an unruly ponytail. Her face flushed and happy. The skinny teenager was now a slender young woman. Had I been standing up too close or back too far?

On the butcher block beside the stove were several bright little pyramids—grated lemon rind, chopped herbs, minced garlic, Parmesan cheese, red pepper flakes—and small dishes of lemon juice and olive oil. A large pot of water simmered on the stove.

"We're having pasta. I found the recipe in a magazine. I make it all the time at home. It's really simple—pasta with fresh herbs." She poured two glasses of wine. "You can use any herbs you like, but I put a lot of basil in this time." She raised her glass. "For good luck, I guess."

Cucumber and Smoked Salmon Oreos

These are fussy to prepare but so pretty to serve as a light cocktail canapé. The fresh crunch of the cucumber contrasts beautifully with the salty salmon and the heat of the horseradish.

3 tablespoons of horseradish
1 English cucumber, sliced
½ pound of smoked salmon
Capers for garnish

Spread ½ teaspoon of horseradish on a cucumber slice. Top with a small slice of salmon and another slice of cucumber. Garnish with a caper. Repeat until you have about a dozen canapés.

Meghan's Pasta with Fresh Herbs

The secret to making this easy, delicious pasta is to prep everything in advance. Then you simply cook the spaghettini and toss it all together. In the summer, I like to make it with flat-leaf parsley, lemon verbena, chives, and a little rosemary and thyme, but you can use any combination of herbs you like. Basil, of course, is an excellent choice.

½ pound spaghettini
Grated zest and juice of 1 lemon
¼ cup Parmesan cheese
3 tablespoons olive oil
3 cloves of garlic, minced
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
½ cup chopped fresh herbs

Combine lemon zest and juice, cheese, and 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a small bowl. Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add spaghettini, and cook until al dente.

Meanwhile, heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a large nonstick skillet and sauté garlic and red pepper flakes for 2 minutes. Drain pasta, reserving ¼ cup of the cooking water. Toss pasta with the garlic and pepper flakes. Add Parmesan-lemon juice mixture, chopped herbs, and reserved pasta water to skillet. Mix well and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serves 3 as a main course or 4 as a side dish.

12

A Heartless Diet

The body's fear of death is strong. Sleep eluded Basil. Even after the breathing tube had been removed and his fiery thirst and raw throat were somewhat soothed by rations of ice chips, his demons conspired to keep him awake. Each time he began to drift off, sinking into sweet oblivion, some stubborn reflex, like a tripped wire, would kick-start his consciousness and he would jerk awake. This happened repeatedly during the nights and days following his surgery; the sleeping pills helped, but even they could not quell his body's determination to stay awake. I reasoned that anyone would have trouble sleeping sitting up in a half-lit hospital ward with all the things that go bump in the night. But Basil came to believe that the jerky awakenings were his body's reflexive response to the fact that he had been "dead" during the surgery. "Unconsciousness," his living cells screamed, "is the enemy. Do not succumb."

He also dreaded leaving the ICU. After forty-eight hours in an environment where every blip and tremor his body produced was scrutinized and scrupulously recorded, the idea of going it alone was terrifying. Lolita and her colleagues were like guardian angels made flesh and blood, and sometimes Basil had the sense that it was their vigilance that was keep-

ing him alive; if they averted their eyes, he might simply slip away like a puppet without strings. So Basil was relieved when he learned that he would be spending an additional twelve hours in ICU because his blood pressure was slightly elevated.

Once it was under control, they transferred him to a regular bed in a semiprivate room first thing on a Monday morning. When I finally tracked him down, I was alarmed at how dreadful he looked. Gone were the tubes and the monitors, the vigilant nurse at the foot of his bed, the soothing subdued lighting. In the raw daylight coming in through the big windows beside his new bed, it was obvious that he hadn't shaved or had a shower in days. I realized that I had never seen Basil with a three-day growth of beard. In fact, I can't recall him ever going for even a day without shaving. His normally gray hair was plastered darkly against his skull. There were dark red circles under his eyes, and his full round face looked gaunt and grizzled. His broad, robust chest and shoulders seemed hunched and hollowed. He had aged years in a matter of days.

With the help of an orderly, he was able to take his first shower in days, which improved both his appearance and his morale enormously. That afternoon, his brother-in-law Bob and his nephew Paul dropped by. If Paul, a strapping fifteen-year-old, was nonplussed by his uncle's weakened state, he didn't show it. A natural clown, he simply started in with "The Simpsons" gags, leaving Basil struggling not to laugh too hard. Then, when an orderly showed up with an aluminum walker and the news that it was time for the patient to go for a walk, Paul pushed the offending device aside and, pretending he didn't see the fear on Basil's face, offered his own muscular arm as support.

Bob and I watched them heading slowly down the corridor. It was a sobering sight. Paul, who only a few months ear-

lier had been a fat, goofy kid, the baby of the family, now overshadowed a diminished Basil shuffling along in his pajama bottoms, a blue hospital gown tied loosely across his bent back. I thought of the family photos of Basil only a few years ago, tall and tanned, laughing, his little nephew astride his own broad shoulders. How quickly the boy becomes the man. How easily frailty sets in. I rebelled inwardly. He was only forty-four, too young for this. The stooped figure at the end of the hall, turning slowly to make the long journey back, was an aberration, the ghost of what might lie ahead for both of us, but only a ghost, not the real thing. It was too soon.

Despite his obvious frailty, I ached to have him home again. Basil, who prior to his operation had chafed at every unnecessary hour he had to spend in the hospital, was now ambivalent. As much as he hated it, the hospital had become a safe haven from his fears of dying. He was a little like a career criminal contemplating life on the outside—freedom, yes, but at what cost? From his point of view, home loomed like an impossible frontier, a brave new world that he wasn't certain he was ready for. And yet he didn't have much choice: a chronic shortage of beds meant that patients were discharged as quickly as possible—a scant five days after his operation.

One afternoon, as I walked to the elevator with his sister Nora, she raised the issue of home care.

"You'll need help, don't you think?"

I hadn't even thought about it. I planned to take a week off work to look after Basil myself.

"What about the stairs?" she said, reminding me that our house had no main-floor bathroom.

"He can stay upstairs," I replied. "The television's up there. I can take him his meals." I sounded more confident than I felt. He would need to go for two or three walks a day—outdoors. He couldn't stay upstairs.

"I think you should hire a private nurse," she said firmly, "at least for the first few days. I'd like to pay for it."

It was the only time that Nora came close to interfering. Strong-willed, some might say domineering, she had never, in the time I had been married to Basil, brought the considerable force of her personality to bear on anything we did.

I went back to Basil's room.

"What do you think? Should we get you a nurse?"

Uncertainty flickered around his eyes. Then he shook his head.

"No, Babe. We'll be okay. I just want to be at home—with you."

"Nora thinks we should." He rolled his eyes. "She's worried about you. She wants to help."

"Do *you* want a nurse?" he asked. I looked at him. It was Wednesday; he was scheduled to go home the next day. He seemed better already but still very weak. We had been to our official debriefing video session that morning. Basil and me and three other couples, all of them much older, the men in their nightgowns, the wives in their crepe-soled shoes. We had laughed about it afterwards, the cheerful film footage of a young Asian woman shepherding a heavy older man down leafy streets. The film radiated sensible advice, lots of fresh air, exercise, healthy food, everything in moderation. The delicate issue of sex was raised finally—a subject that was not exactly top of mind with any of the people in the room at that point. An awkward silence fell over the group. It was carefully explained that sexual relations with a *familiar* partner were fine as soon as the spirit moved—not much of a comment on marital sex but reassuring in its own way.

They made it sound so easy. I was reminded of when my first child was born, the happy films shown in prenatal classes of life with baby, and then the reality of those first few days at home: the enormity of caring for this fragile creature, the

fear that she might die, the blur of exhaustion, the relentless routine. I got through that. I could get through this.

"Okay," I said. "No nurse."

He made it up the stairs—slowly, resting three or four times on the way. The first night home was the worst. Since his surgery, Basil had been sleeping with the head of his hospital bed elevated in a semisitting position, something I tried to duplicate at home. But even though I had bought a pair of firm new pillows, they didn't provide the same kind of support. He spent the first few hours at home sitting in our upstairs TV room on a love seat with his feet elevated on the coffee table. But when he got into bed that night, he couldn't get comfortable. Basil's chest hurt despite the painkillers, and each time he began to drift off, the invisible demons jerked him awake again. He finally returned to the love seat and fell asleep sitting up with the TV on, hugging the pink folded hospital sheet to his chest. He couldn't have been very comfortable, but I didn't dare try to get him to move, and in the end neither of us slept very much. It was a long night.

The next morning he had an appointment with Dr. Crawford, who examined his battle scars and prescribed a good strong sleeping pill, which let him sleep at last. Basil still jerked awake occasionally, but he returned to the bedroom. His nights were mostly peaceful, and his days were given over to a gentle routine.

I would bring him his breakfast on a tray in the morning—granola or muesli with plain low-fat yogurt and whole wheat toast and jam or peanut butter. No butter, no eggs, no bacon or sausages. Then he had a bath (no showers until his incision healed) and shaved. After breakfast, we went for a walk, two and a half minutes up to the corner and back, very

slowly. Back home, he settled into a big red armchair by the fireplace with the dog on his lap to spend the morning reading. Lunch was usually soup and a sandwich. He spent the afternoon upstairs watching movies and reading, then another short walk, then dinner, more TV, and he was in bed by nine. Once every hour, I would hear the breathy whistle, like a therapeutic pan flute, as he did his breathing exercises.

On the third day, Basil and I were out for our morning walk when we ran into one of our neighbors, Sue Edwards, playing street hockey with her three-year-old son, Finn. When she saw Basil, she dropped her stick, threw her arms wide, and gathered him into a gentle embrace. Basil kept his arms at his side; he wasn't into bear hugs just yet. We had been warned that spontaneous weeping was one of the more bizarre aftereffects of surgery and indeed Sue's gesture brought tears—which were never very far from the surface at the best of times—to Basil's eyes. Sue, who is a family physician at St. Joseph's Hospital, wanted to know everything. We talked about his recovery, the things we were doing, the things we could change.

"Do you know about Dean Ornish?" Sue asked. We shook our heads.

"He's written a book about how you can reverse heart disease through diet. It's been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for ages."

"Really?" said Basil. His stooped shoulders straightened ever so slightly.

"Yup," she continued cheerfully. "He claims his diet will actually unclog clogged arteries."

Basil looked at me. For the first time since he'd come home, the fog of fear lifted; there was fire in his eyes. Sue saw it too.

"I have to warn you, though," she grimaced lightly. "It's pretty extreme."

This, I knew, was going to be the big test. Basil had already warned me that he planned to be "radical" when it came to his diet. I had nodded solemnly and promised that I would help him in every way I could. And that's what I was doing. Already, I had banned sausages and butter and eggs from our life. That's "radical," right? No more cheese, or cream, or thick juicy steaks. That's radical, too. At least it is to me. Our cupboards were filling up with dried beans; fresh fruit and veggies were spilling out of the fridge. Fiber, fiber everywhere.

But I could see by the set of Basil's jaw that this wouldn't be enough.

"I have a copy at home," Sue offered, evidently missing the look of dread I flashed her. "I'll drop it by later."

I thought of a man I'd sat beside at a dinner party years earlier; he was in remission from cancer at the time, and while the rest of us tucked into homemade shepherd's pie and tarte tatin for dessert, he contemplated the plate of steamed broccoli and brown rice that our hostess, a superb cook, had prepared specially for him. He was on a macrobiotic diet, he explained as he toyed with his food. It was saving his life, he said, as he bravely stabbed a bright green floret. And maybe it was. It's just that he looked so thin and unhappy, so anxious and scared, as I'm sure he had every right to be. And I thought, it's true, we are what we eat.

That evening, Basil devoured Dean Ornish's book and then insisted that I read it too. And "extreme" about sums it up. Basically, Ornish's "reversal diet" is very low in fat, low in cholesterol, high in fiber, excludes all dairy except low-fat yogurt, all animal products, all caffeine. Alcohol, sugar, and salt are allowed in small amounts. Nuts, avocados, and seeds are not.

So, what's left? Fruit, vegetables, whole grains, beans and lentils, seasoning, and herbs.

Naturally, the book is filled with tales of miraculous recoveries and, like most diet books, testimonies from people who claim never to have stuck to any diet—until they tried this one. The recipes sounded good, but I was skeptical; they were so labor-intensive. Who, I wondered, could possibly have time to prepare Ornish's "simple, delicious" recipes? Day two, for instance, prescribes a heart-healthy regime that includes pizza Provençal, tossed green salad, peach bread pudding, tomato and lentil soup, wild mushroom flan, pears with black cherry sauce, and more.

Oprah Winfrey, with her army of personal chefs, might do well on this diet, but I was certain I would never be able to stick to it. Before long, I knew perfectly well, we'd be eating the same bean salad three days in a row and last night's leftover mushroom and leek crepes cold for breakfast because we just didn't have time to whip up a batch of fat-free buckwheat pancakes before going to work. And eventually, the monotony of it, the cholesterol-free drudgery of it, would starve our souls into eating bacon and eggs again.

But Basil wanted to try, and he was the one staring death in the face, so I agreed we'd give it a go.

We lasted about three days, and we might have continued longer (fiber overload had not quite set in) if it hadn't been for Dr. Elzawi. I went along with Basil to see the cardiologist on his first postsurgical visit, and after he had finished admiring Basil's well-healed incision, I asked him what he thought of Dean Ornish.

"Oh very good. Very good," Elzawi enthused. Then he peered over his glasses and deadpanned: "Very good if you are a rabbit, that is." He reiterated what we instinctively knew: that a sensible diet is a balanced diet. No doubt Ornish's regime can reverse heart disease . . . if you stay on it. Basil was fairly new to this, but I've been trying to stick to fad diets all my life, and I've never been able to last more than

a few weeks on any "diet plan." Perhaps this sounds reckless, but a lifetime without the occasional comfort of a plate of shepherd's pie or a grating of aged Parmesan sounds like a very long lifetime indeed. In any case, we came to realize that we had embarked on an eating plan that for us was unrealistic. Surely hunger, that gnawing ache for a little milk in your coffee or a drizzle of virgin olive oil on a ripe tomato, can be a big contributor to stress. And stress, as we were quickly learning, had played a major role in Basil's heart condition.

What he needed to do was learn to relax, to stop beating himself up. Obsessing about food, the natural consequence of any diet, was going to increase Basil's anxiety. Going hungry would only make him jumpier. I know that Ornish would argue that you can eat as much as you want on his diet. But hunger is not just about how much you eat, it's also about what you eat. I thought of my macrobiotic dinner companion, of the haunted look in his eyes as he chewed his brown rice. Fear was what was driving him. And it is a dreadful master. The challenge for the rest of Basil's life would be to conquer his fears, not feed them.

Nevertheless, we thank Dean Ornish for some of the excellent no-fat recipes in his book. Here are two that we have taken the liberty of adapting to our own less rigid standards.

Corn Salad with Lime-Cilantro Dressing

The flavors in this salad are tart and refreshing. You can use canned or frozen corn, but it tastes best in summer made with tender sweet corn. I have added a chopped jalapeno pepper to the original recipe to give it a little heat.

2 cups fresh corn kernels
½ teaspoon freshly minced garlic

¼ cup white wine
¾ cup finely diced red pepper
¾ cup finely diced green pepper
½ cup finely diced red onion
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
1 finely chopped jalapeno pepper (optional)

Lime-cilantro dressing

2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar
2 teaspoons lime juice
1 teaspoon safflower oil
1 teaspoon sesame oil
2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
⅛ teaspoon cayenne
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
½ teaspoon salt

Braise the corn with the garlic in the white wine for about 5 minutes. When the corn is cooked, toss with the diced peppers, onion, and ginger. Mix the dressing and toss with the vegetables. Serve at room temperature. Serves 4.

Tofu Cheese with Fresh Herbs

Dr. Ornish calls tofu a "miracle food" and indeed it is. Not only is it a low-fat, high-protein substitute for cheese, eggs, and meat, but like other soy products tofu actually helps to lower LDL cholesterol. Basil and I never used to eat tofu; we didn't like the texture and the lack of taste. This recipe addresses both concerns. It's good with crackers or raw vegetables. The flavors intensify the longer it sits.

8 ounces tofu, drained
2 tablespoons white wine
2 tablespoons plain low-fat yogurt (optional)
1 shallot, or 4 scallions, finely diced
1 large clove garlic, minced
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh herbs such as parsley, chives, lemon verbena, basil, thyme, rosemary
Sherry vinegar to taste
½ teaspoon kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
½ to 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Process the tofu in a food processor with the wine and yogurt until very smooth, 1 or 2 minutes. If the tofu is dry, add more yogurt. Transfer the tofu to a bowl and mix in the rest of the ingredients. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

13

Little House on the Mad River

After searching for a country place for almost a year, we took possession of our little house in Singhampton just three months before Basil had his heart surgery. I grew up in the country just north of the city and after marrying my high school boyfriend had raised our children on a small farm east of Toronto, so I was no stranger to rural life. After our divorce, I moved to Toronto, where I have lived for the past fifteen years. But as I reached midlife, I began to long once again for the countryside. In fact, the call of the wild was becoming so insistent that it bordered on obsession. Basil, who is fiscally more conservative than I am and who has city smog, not sparkling trout streams, running in his veins, was not at all convinced that having two houses was a prudent move. But, perhaps bewildered by the intensity of my quest, he went along.

I spent hours every week online searching for "charming century homes" and "quaint hobby farms." Each time I came across something even remotely plausible, I was on the phone to my real estate agent. Basil and I spent countless Saturdays tromping over snow-covered fields and peering into water-filled basements. We looked at a "fully restored Ontario cottage" where cement had been poured down the chimney to

block off the fireplace and at a "renovated schoolhouse" on a "secluded lot" next door to a junkyard. We toured an "authentic Victorian farmhouse" backing onto a gravel pit and a former pig farm with "great potential."

With each disastrous foray into the rural jungle, Basil grew less and less enthusiastic, while I became more and more determined that our perfect little getaway was out there, if I could only find it. Something deep inside me was crying out for space and quiet, something not altogether rational. So insistent was the whisper of pine-scented breezes running through my head that I even persuaded Basil we should make an offer on the little schoolhouse with the bathroom fixtures stained dark brown from the iron in the water and the field full of wrecked cars and refrigerators next door. (The township clerk assured me the neighbor was going to clean things up.) Fortunately, the woman refused our offer. "Not motivated to sell," said the agent.

Things were coming to a head. Even I could see that my dream and the reality of what we could afford were never likely to jibe. It was also becoming increasingly obvious that Basil's patience was wearing thin. I feel terrible about all this, of course, now that I know how precarious his health was at the time. My fixation on real estate could only have added to his stress. We were even starting to argue about it. Who knows how much all that traipsing about the countryside in the bitter spring weather contributed to his heart attack that May. To make matters worse, his job at a Toronto newspaper was not going well; the division of the company he worked for had merged with another division; people were being laid off, and Basil's future was uncertain.

I tried to give it up, to tell myself that it was more important that I want what I have rather than have what I want. But my little obsession had turned into a minor addiction, and I couldn't keep my itchy fingers off the real estate websites.

Every day I checked, just in case something came on the market. Early in May, I found a hundred-year-old gray frame farmhouse on the outskirts of a village called Singhampton. It sounded promising (as they all did): refinished pine floors, woodstove, open kitchen. The picture showed a neat little house with a river and trees and open fields in the background.

I found Singhampton on a map, a miniscule dot about an hour and a half north of Toronto. I didn't know the area, but Basil had more than once suggested we look there instead of the eastern regions that I had been concentrating on. It had been a couple of weeks since I'd mentioned "the country," so I thought I'd try one more time.

To my surprise, Basil sounded interested when I described the house to him. I realized that he was ambivalent about the idea, not merely opposed to it, and so I pressed my case once again. That Sunday (the day after Basil had his heart attack at the gym, though we didn't know it at the time), we headed north toward Georgian Bay, driving through the undulating hills of Mulmur Township. It was a clear, cold day in mid-May. The farm fields unrolled before us like velvet green brocade. The forest floors were carpeted with trilliums. Strings of Canada geese wove across a cloudless sky. Basil was in good spirits, if only because it was a beautiful day for a drive. We planned to go for a walk on the Bruce Trail, the real reason for the outing, we told ourselves. The little house, we were certain, would turn out to be another disaster.

"So," I speculated on the way, "I wonder if it will have a view of a landfill site or a gravel pit."

Basil held a copy of the listing I'd printed out. "Hey, it doesn't say anything here about indoor plumbing."

"Doh, I knew I should have asked about that."

The agent had not exactly been a fount of information when I called. The real estate office in the town of Creemore

(about fifteen minutes south of Singhampton) that she and her husband ran was usually closed on Sundays. When I insisted this was the only day we could come, she grudgingly agreed to show it to us.

"Can you tell me a little more about it," I asked.

"Well," she said, "it's nice."

"Nice?" I repeated.

"Yes."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Well, it's an old house, you know? I mean two of the bedrooms don't have closets."

"Oh."

"And, it's small," she paused, "but there's room in the kitchen for a table and chairs. Yes, it's got an eat-in kitchen."

"That's it?"

"Yes, it's nice though. Deb's got it fixed up real nice."

Deb, the seller, was a young woman in her twenties, a schoolteacher who had moved to the area to take her first job after graduating. She'd only owned the house for a little more than a year and now she was selling it because she was getting married to an insurance agent and moving about fifteen miles away. Since nearly every other house we'd looked at had been on the market because of a marriage breakup, this fact alone seemed like good karma.

We followed the agent, Christine, in her SUV (everyone up here drives an SUV; one neighbor actually laughed out loud when he saw our late-model white Jetta parked in the driveway. "How are you going to find it after it snows?" he sneered) out of Creemore, along the winding River Road, through the hamlet of Glen Huron, past the ski club at Devil's Glen. Every mile took us higher and higher until we reached Singhampton (pop. 150), an utterly unprepossessing village situated at the junction of a major truck route and the Mad River.

The house was off the main road at the end of a street with the somewhat prosaic name of Milltown Road. It had a certain old-world charm, but up close we could see that the gray siding was buckling in places and the deck was rickety and painted a weathered shade of pink. Weeds had overtaken the perennial beds and one of two old maple trees that had been in the photo I'd seen on the Internet was now a gaping hole in the ground.

As Christine led us around to the back door, the wind stiffened and the sun was suddenly swallowed by a phalanx of dark clouds. An old yellow Lab tied to the deck railing tottered to his feet, tail wagging, to meet us. Though I had prepared myself for this, my heart was sinking like a leaky canoe. The house was much closer to the road than I expected, and it was so exposed. Other than the aforementioned maple, the only trees were three ancient black spruce marking the west property line like a trio of sullen giants.

I'm not sure what I expected as we followed Christine through the back door, but we were startled by what we found: a bright, open kitchen separated from a large dining area by a bricked-in woodstove. The wainscoted walls were freshly painted a soft green, the wood floors stained a warm caramel color. Basil and I exchanged a look.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor. The three bedrooms were surprisingly large, freshly painted in a trio of pastels; the pine floors gleamed like butter. But it was the bathroom that clinched the deal. At least five times the size of our city facilities, it had whitewashed wood floors, an old claw-footed cast-iron tub, a stand-alone shower, and a huge floor-to-ceiling window. This was truly a room with a view (which we had somehow overlooked on our way in) that swept down over the wide, lazy river and the greening fields rising up on the other side.

Basil turned to me and mouthed the words "I think this is it." I nodded, a little stunned by what we were seeing. It wasn't that the house was luxurious, just the opposite. It was so pared down, so simple and without ostentation, and so filled with light. And then there was the view, not vast and spectacular like the vistas we had seen on the drive up, for which the area is famous. The view here was close, almost intimate—a river, a field, a forest—but soothing in the way it held our eyes out and away and lifted our hearts.

And as we walked around the weedy little half acre, the sun came out and we could see that the patchy grass was speckled with snowdrops and a thick fringe of daffodils hugged the house. So, we followed Christine back to her office and bought it that very afternoon.

We took possession in August in the middle of a brutal heat wave. The grass was dried and brown, and the river, so richly dark and wide in May, had dwindled to a muddy trickle. Basil was tired and morose; he kept saying that he felt something was wrong. But his symptoms were so unspecific, I hoped it was just fatigue and that a rest would help. I was trying to be optimistic, but I felt flat and lonely. I missed my daughters, Meg in Ottawa and Leah in London. This was turning into the summer of our discontent, and we didn't know why. In a letter to Leah, far away in London, I wrote about my unease:

"Our new house is bright and cool and I think quite charming in a cottagey sort of way. We've been driving around trying to get our bearings, exploring the area. It's breathtakingly beautiful—long, magnificent, sweeping views. It seems that every farmhouse has been painstakingly restored. This morning we went to the farmer's market in Creemore. I was really impressed; we bought local corn, raspberries, beets and carrots, sheep's milk cheese, and homemade sausage made by the Mennonites. The village is

sleepy and quaint—Victorian brick houses on a maple-lined street.

"Writing this down makes it sound like paradise, and I do think we've lucked into a wonderful area. But these first few days are hard. It's been so long since I've moved to a strange place, I'd forgotten how disorienting it is. We both feel a little depressed—all that money, all the anticipation, and now what? Basil keeps saying, 'What are we doing here?' He's joking—but only half. He was skeptical from the outset, and already he's worrying about break-ins and the expense. Just what Basil needs, something else to worry about. I realize that he has never moved anywhere outside of Toronto—and the strangeness is getting to him. *And* his knees hurt and his hands hurt and his neck hurts—and he's so down so much of the time that it's starting to get to me. So, of course, I wake up in the night with waves of stark terror washing over me. 'What have I done? All that money. I hate it here. I want to go home.' So childish.

"The house is lovely—but it's not perfect—a little shabbier than we thought—and the grass is all burned and dry and the tub is too small for Basil and you can hear the trucks on the highway, and, and, and . . .

"But so far I love it—not without reservation, but I love it. Sort of the way I feel about Basil. I wish he wasn't so sad all the time. I wish he could find joy in things—or maybe I'm not being fair and I'm expecting him to want the same things I want. Maybe I'm forcing him to get excited about things that are important to me, things he doesn't care about. Like a house in the country that's too close to the highway . . ."

I didn't mail it. It seemed a betrayal to speak of the man I loved in this way, the man I had married barely five years earlier in such a swirl of happiness. Instead, my letter to Leah became the beginning of a weekend journal I have been keeping here in Singhampton. Reading it now makes me realize

how things were spiraling downward like an eddy in a fast-moving stream. Perilous times. If we'd only known.

We named our little house on the Mad River Bedlam. It is anything but. Despite my initial uneasiness, it gradually became a haven in the weeks and months that followed. Basil, too, began to look forward to pulling into the driveway on Friday evenings. He too experienced a profound letting go watching the mysterious deepening of the light on the river at the end of the day. The clarity of the silence and the lightness of the air began slowly to lighten his unnamed burden. But it was too late for the house to work its magic.

In late October, on the weekend after the Canadian Thanksgiving, while Basil attended a conference in Toronto, I visited Bedlam alone. The annual extravaganza of fall color was over, and the woods on the far side of the river were muted and dark. In the morning, mist hung like shreds of gauze above the water. In the fields, geese gathered to graze on corn stubble before their long journey south. I didn't know it would be the last time I would see the house until Christmas. I remember that the brief solitude felt like a blessing, a respite from the thickening pall of our life in the city. But I tried not to think about it. Instead, I bought a bushel of Northern Spys in Glen Huron at the Giffin apple store and set to work peeling and paring and pureeing.

Making apple butter is a two-day operation. You have to arrange your life so that you're never away from the stove for more than an hour or so—time for short walks with Harpo, time to read in brief bursts in a chair pulled close to the wood-stove. It is perfect therapy: the soothing repetition of quartering and coring so many apples, of cooking them to a soft, pulpy mass, and then pressing the mixture through a food mill to make a velvety puree. The long, slow cooking of the sweetened, seasoned puree fills the house with the irresistible smell of cinnamon, cloves, and allspice.

When the mixture has thickened to a deep, burnished brown and the texture has smoothed from velvet to silk, the butter is ladled into rows of sterilized jars and processed in a hot-water bath, then labeled and stored. By the end of the weekend, twelve mason jars of apple butter lined the shelf at the top of the cellar stairs. I tucked one of them into my bag—an offering for Basil—before locking the door and heading back to the city and the pell-mell of what awaited me there.

Spiced Apple Butter

Named for its smooth, rich texture, apple butter uses less sugar than most fruit preserves. This is a two-day project—cook and puree the fruit on day one; refrigerate overnight; cook the puree and process on day two—so I usually double or quadruple this recipe. It will become a staple: on toast and muffins, mixed with yogurt and granola, or baked into the low-fat cake recipe below.

I find that recipes for apple butter always understate the length of time needed to cook the apple puree down to a thick, brown butter—anywhere from three to six hours depending on the type of apples you use. So be prepared to stay home and stir frequently, particularly in the last stages when the butter can stick to the pan and burn if not watched carefully.

I prefer Northern Spys for their texture and sweetness, but they take longer to cook and soften. McIntosh, Granny Smith, Cortland, Spartan, Golden Delicious, or a mixture will work well. This is a good way to use up apples that are beginning to go soft.

Equipment: a large heavy pot or Dutch oven, a food mill, mason jars, lids and rings, a large canning pot, a jar funnel, a ladle, and tongs.

4 pounds apples
1½ cups apple cider
2 tablespoons lemon juice
3½ cups packed brown sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (or to taste)
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg (or to taste)
¼ teaspoon ground cloves (or to taste)
Pinch of allspice

Cut apples into eighths; remove stems and blossom ends. Place in a Dutch oven or a large, heavy-bottomed pot with the cider. Bring to a boil, cover, lower heat, and boil gently until the apples are very soft—anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.

Press the cooked fruit through a food mill. Return the puree to a clean heavy-bottomed pot. Refrigerate overnight, if desired, or let the mixture cool slightly and stir in lemon juice, brown sugar, and spices. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until sugar is dissolved. Increase heat; bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Lower heat and boil gently, uncovered, until the mixture is dark brown and thickened—several hours. Test for doneness by placing a small amount on a cold plate. Let stand for a few minutes. It is done when there is no liquid seeping from the edges.

Ladle into sterilized jars to within ¼ inch of the rim. Apply prepared lids and rings; tighten just until fingertip tight. Process jars in boiling water for 10 minutes. Let rest at room temperature until cool. Check seals and refrigerate any unsealed jars. Makes about four 250 ml. jars.

Apple Butter Cake

Using apple butter instead of butter means this cake is sweet and moist and low in fat.

1 tablespoon butter
1 cup spiced apple butter
¾ cup lightly packed brown sugar
3 tablespoons safflower oil
½ cup raisins
½ cup buttermilk
1 egg, beaten
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
2¼ cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons each, cinnamon and ginger
1 teaspoon each, baking soda, baking powder, and allspice
¼ teaspoon salt

Lightly spray a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with vegetable oil spray. Heat butter on medium-high heat in a small pan until it turns brown. Pour into a mixing bowl. Add apple butter, sugar, and oil. Stir until smooth.

Add raisins, buttermilk, egg, and vanilla. Mix well. Combine flour, cinnamon, ginger, baking soda, baking powder, allspice, and salt. Stir into wet ingredients until just combined. Pour into baking dish.

Bake in a 350°F oven for 35 minutes or until a cake tester inserted in the center comes out clean. Let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

14

Hard Days and Nights

One of the questions Basil asked on his first visit to his cardiologist after his surgery was how soon he would be able to spend a few days in Singhampton.

"Where's the nearest hospital?" Dr. Elzawi asked.

"Collingwood." A town of about 18,000, Collingwood's hospital was small and better equipped to deal with skiers' broken bones than cardiac emergencies.

Dr. Elzawi thought for a moment and shook his head. He decided to take the cautious route. Basil should wait six weeks before straying too far from home. We were both disappointed. It would be Christmas before we could make sure our house was all right. We hadn't yet spent a winter there, and we had concerns about pipes freezing if it suddenly turned cold. A month had gone by since my apple butter adventure; it was now mid-November, wet and rainy in the city, but in Singhampton, according to reports from my two nephews who cross-country ski at a club in the neighboring village of Duntroon, it was full-blown winter.

A foot of snow had already fallen. We had made arrangements in the summer with a neighbor, Lyle Kedwell, to plow our driveway; he'd also delivered a face cord of firewood that was stacked and ready in the shed. But we weren't sure if the

oil tank was full or if the furnace was working properly. Lyle had warned us about winter in Singhampton. "Yup," he told Basil after they'd settled on a price for the wood, "it snows pretty much every day up here after the middle of November."

Meanwhile, Basil was doing well: his walks had increased to ten minutes, three times a day. He could keep that little blue ball fluttering at the top of the breathing tube for a full ten seconds. I was back at work, so he spent most of his days alone, reading in a big red armchair in the living room with the dog on his lap. He read Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and *Bleak House*, a novel by the Australian writer Peter Carey called *Jack Maggs*, a shelf full of spy thrillers, and countless magazines. His chest still hurt a lot, especially since he was trying to wean himself off the painkillers. But he could make it up the stairs without stopping to rest three or four times and was even cooking simple meals. He was sleeping well, except for the one or two times a night when he'd shake himself awake, jerking as though an electrical current had passed through his body. These episodes would wake us both, and though Basil would drift off almost immediately (thanks to the sleeping pills), I would lie there in the dark listening for each breath, the blood in my veins turning to ice if his faint snoring stopped. Countless times during those early weeks, I placed my hand on his chest while he slept to reassure myself that my husband was still alive.

The supply of sleeping pills he'd left the hospital with was running low, and though it was important that he get a good night's sleep, he began to use them sparingly. He worried about becoming dependent on them, and he was determined to eliminate as many pills as he could from his daily regimen.

The change in Basil's physical appearance in a few short weeks was shocking. He had lost almost twenty pounds since he went into the hospital, and his normally full face was hag-

gard and pale. For years, Basil had worked out with weights, and one of the striking things about him had been his tremendous physique, his broad chest and muscular arms and shoulders. Now, he seemed to have shrunk. What alarmed me most was his stoop. He carried himself as though he had something to hide, his shoulders rounded, his torso curled in on itself in a defeated arc. When I suggested he try standing straighter, he said he couldn't, that the incision in his chest felt tight as if it might rip open if he weren't careful. And, like the long red line running from his ankle to his thigh, it hurt a lot. It wasn't that he had something to hide, rather he had something to protect, and his body was circling the wagons. The thickly folded pink hospital sheet became his security blanket. In the car, he placed it between his chest and the seat belt. At night, he slept on his back, the sheet held tightly in his arms.

The stoop went away eventually. As his breastbone healed, his body began to unfold, though it took several months. It would take a full year for the two halves of the bone, split lengthwise and then wired back together, to knit completely, and during that time Basil was not allowed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds, a fact our eighteen-pound schnoodle had trouble understanding. It's difficult to underestimate the degree of devastation that open-heart surgery inflicts on the body. Basil's favorite analogy was that he'd been "cracked open like a lobster."

The scar on his chest, a violent half-inch-wide streak of vivid pink about eight inches long, is as smooth and shiny as a length of satin ribbon. And though the long incision on his left leg is faint now, his ankle still tends to swell and his foot often feels numb. After having a major vein removed, the circulation in his leg is permanently impaired. Still, it seems a fair trade-off for all that oxygen-rich blood that's now getting to his heart. After all the slicing and dicing, Basil could

breathe freely again almost immediately after the surgery. He was weak in those first weeks at home, but the chest pains, the vicelike tightness that had plagued him, were gone.

What a piece of work is man. Still, the design of the human body does have limits. I suppose it makes good anatomical sense for the heart, the body's most vital organ, to be shielded by a rack of bones, but those pesky ribs certainly make the pump difficult to get at when you need to fix it. It seems so violent and medieval, the process of slicing open a chest and sawing through bone, compared to the space-age elegance of the angiogram—threading a tiny probe on a miniscule catheter through an artery and taking pictures of the heart.

Open-heart surgery is both savage and death defying. It is chilling to realize that the heart must be stopped and the patient kept alive on a heart-lung machine—temporarily dead in other words. Without this complicated technology, surgeons would be trying to perform delicate arterial grafts on a lump of muscle that's bouncing about like a playful puppy. But it is the aftereffects of the heart-lung machine and the long healing process required for the breastbone to knit that make bypass surgery so difficult, not the relatively simple technique of grafting one vein onto another. If the heart were located in the abdomen, bypass wouldn't be much more complicated than a tubal ligation.

Now a new generation of heart surgeons is making great strides with a technique called *beating-heart surgery*, which vastly diminishes the risk and discomfort to patients. As incredible as it seems, these surgeons perform the delicate grafts while the heart is beating, which means there is no need for the heart-lung machine with its attendant risk of inflammation and infection. Recovery is faster and easier, and the risk, particularly for seriously ill patients, is much reduced. Beating-heart surgery does have its drawbacks—

the possibility of surgical error is higher, of course, but more and more surgeons are mastering the technique all the time. In Canada, about 600 beating-heart operations are performed every year, mostly in the Toronto area.

Basil and I didn't find out about the procedure until after his operation, of course. And even though it will be years before it replaces the conventional approach, the technique offers hope of a less traumatic adventure should Basil ever have to go through all this again, which is, unfortunately, a real possibility because of his relative youth. We take consolation in the fact that medical science continues to find new and better ways of treating this disease. Forty years ago, Basil's father was doomed to die a premature death because the surgical techniques that saved his son did not exist. Who knows, if Basil's arteries clog up again, maybe he won't have to have surgery at all. Researchers are experimenting with injections of growth-promoting proteins that will allow healthy blood vessels to grow and replace the sick arteries. Stem cell research is also holding out hope for the generation of new healthy arteries some day.

Right now, though, these matters were the last things on our mind. Basil's big challenge was to recover his strength and vigor. Mine was coping with his unpredictable moods, especially when I was feeling shaky and scared myself. He had good days and bad ones, of course. Mostly he put on a brave front, trying hard to be determined and cheerful, but the blues were lurking in the alleys of his mind like feral cats. And when they came slinking by, they inflicted great gouges in his fragile equilibrium, plunging him into bouts of intense irritability, especially if he was tired, which he often was. I didn't recognize his brooding and snappishness as depression at first. When Basil is sad or afraid, it is often expressed as anger. Little things irritated him—if I talked on the phone too long or forgot something at the supermarket, for instance.

I would see him seething, his mouth set, his jaw clenched, brooding over the unfairness of his situation, convinced that everyone, including me, was against him. Sometimes he would explode in a very credible imitation of a child's furious tantrum, storming from the room in a whirl of outrage and hurled accusations. These episodes were frightening, because we both knew his blood pressure would be rising like mercury on a hot day in July, not an ideal state of affairs for someone recovering from heart surgery. And I was in a constant state of high alert, tiptoeing around his moods, stepping lightly to avoid triggering his anger, which made me alternately guilt-ridden and resentful.

Just as often, though, Basil's sadness was simply that. A friend in the health-care field warned him that he would find it hard to control his tears. And indeed, the slightest thing would make him weep—an old song, a tragic news story, an act of kindness, or sometimes nothing at all. Sometimes the tears came unbidden and without warning, and he would find himself alone sobbing as though his heart (pardon the metaphor) would break.

I worried during those dark late fall days that Basil was alone too much and that the bleakness of the season was affecting his morale and his recovery. It was one of the reasons I longed to take him to the country, where I imagined the light from the snow-covered fields pouring in through the big living room windows lifting his spirits even as the temperature dropped. Not that we weren't comfortable in our city house. The barrage of flowers and plants that arrived in the first couple of weeks brightened things up enormously. And even though Basil spent long stretches of time alone with the dog, he had plenty of visitors, sometimes from unexpected quarters.

One afternoon when I was working at home, there was a knock at the door, and I opened it to find a portly, middle-aged

black man, whom I recognized but couldn't place, standing on the porch. Harpo followed up with a greeting even more raucous than usual. Indeed, I thought he was going to launch himself through the screen door. When I looked down, I realized who it was. At the man's feet was a miniature schnauzer exactly the same size as Harpo that began barking back as the two dogs faced off with just a screen between them. It was impossible to utter even an ordinary "how can I help you" over the din. I scooped Harpo into my arms just as Basil came out of the kitchen to see what all the noise was about.

"Carl," he said. "What a surprise. Come in."

"Buster," I said as I opened the door to man and dog, "it's you." Of course I recognized them. It was Buster and his person. I gave Basil a sideways look. The fact that he knew the man's name went against all the rules of dog-park culture, where the dogs are formally introduced and their habits and personalities discussed with intense interest but where human introductions seldom go beyond "This is Cosmo's Mum or Gulliver's Dad or Tillie's Aunt." Harpo and I had encountered Buster on our daily ramblings but not often, because Basil usually did the before-bed walk and Buster's big walk of the day was at night. One evening not long after the surgery, I ran into Buster and his owner, and he surprised me by asking after Basil.

"Well," I said, surprised at the question. "It's funny you should ask. Because he's just had open-heart surgery."

The man looked so stricken that I gave him all the details. He asked me to wish Basil well and that was that. Now he was sitting on my living room sofa sipping a cup of ginger tea while the two dogs rolled around on the Persian rug hardly noticing that it was not a grassy knoll in the park. As I listened to the two men exchange more than pleasantries, I realized that out of their nocturnal encounters had grown a kind

of friendship. And that this was a happy result of urban dog ownership.

Even in a city as diversified as Toronto, most of us get to know few people outside the narrow socioeconomic circles in which we live our daily lives. Carl is a middle-aged widower from Jamaica who owns and operates a neighborhood beauty salon called La Parisienne. He draws his clientele mainly from the large West Indian community in the area, so in the normal course of events there would be no reason for us to get to know him—if it weren't for Buster.

Listening to them talk, I realized that Basil had heard Carl's stories of his frequent visits home to Jamaica. And that he knew about the death of Carl's wife a few years earlier from cancer, how he had recently broken up with his girlfriend, and his continuing struggle with loneliness—much alleviated of course by the presence of Buster. This time, Carl listened as Basil talked about his surgery and the frustrating slowness of his recovery. Because they are men, the tone of their conversation was jocular, making light of their circumstances, with none of the intensity that a similar discussion between two women would have. Their respective fears for the future remained unspoken. But as he got up to leave, urging Basil not to stand, Carl took his host's hand in both of his and he promised to pray for Basil. And as he did, I could hear the bay rum richness of his voice waver with emotion.

Ginger Tea

In addition to soothing upset stomachs and sore throats, ginger has antibiotic and anti-inflammatory properties. We drink it because it tastes wonderful and adds a hint of warmer places to dreary December afternoons.

1 tablespoon fresh ginger, minced
1 teaspoon honey (or to taste)
Boiling water
Squeeze of fresh lemon juice
Pinch of cayenne pepper

Place the ginger and honey in a mug. Fill with boiling water and steep for 4 minutes. Press the ginger with a spoon to release more flavor. Stir in lemon juice and cayenne. Makes 1 cup.

Jamaican Hot Pot

This Caribbean fish stew is not for the faint of heart, but you can control the amount of heat by using fewer peppers. I have called for jalapenos here, but any hot pepper will do. Remember that, as a rule, the smaller it is, the bigger its heat. Always wear gloves when handling chiles and be careful not to touch your eyes.

The small amount of bacon in this recipe gives it a huge flavor bonus without adding an appreciable amount of fat.

4 slices bacon, diced
1½ cups okra, trimmed and sliced
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 sweet red pepper, cut into 1-inch pieces
1 onion, coarsely chopped
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 cup canned tomatoes
3 jalapeno peppers, minced
2 teaspoons dried thyme
2 bay leaves
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 small bottle of clam juice

1 cup fish or chicken stock
1 pound firm white fish fillets such as grouper, haddock, or cod
½ pound scallops, halved if large
½ pound large shrimp, peeled
4 ounces crab meat
Grated zest of 1 orange
¼ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley

Cook the bacon in a heavy casserole until translucent. Pour off all but a small amount of the fat. Add the okra and sauté until lightly browned. Add olive oil, red pepper, onion, and garlic and cook until soft, about 8 minutes.

Add tomatoes, chiles, thyme, bay leaves, and cayenne. Cook over low heat for 15 minutes. Add the clam juice and stock. Cook, partially covered, for 30 minutes.

Add the fish fillets and scallops and raise heat to medium-high. Cook for 2 minutes. Add the shrimp and cook an additional 3 minutes. Add the crab and cook 1 minute more.

Fold in the orange zest, sprinkle with parsley, and serve over rice or barley. Serves 6.

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The Hills Are Alive

In the end, we couldn't wait. We headed for the hills on December 13, a week and a half before Basil's unofficial house arrest had ended. I drove and he rode in the passenger seat, his pink sheet held firmly against his chest in case of sudden stops. The weather was overcast and raw, a bleak, sullen day in the city. But as we headed north, the landscape gradually brightened, and the flat and frosted cornfields looped into hills of blue-green and silver rolling away under a pale, impersonal sky. By the time we reached Singhampton, a weak wintery sun was pushing against the clouds, and we entered a world transformed, impossible to reconcile with the cement-gray city we had left behind.

We pulled into the driveway and sat in the car for a moment. The river, a wide sash of dark green flanking bronze fields when we'd last seen it, was frozen over now, a fine skiff of snow blowing across a smooth surface tinged rose and lavender, reflecting the faint line of sunset on the horizon. The clouds above and the fields below were a backdrop of pure white interrupted only by a border of bare maples knitting sky and snow together like a ragged gray scarf.

And it was cold, much colder than in the city. A wicked wind was blowing from the north, sweeping gusts of white

across the fields. Lyle Kedwell had plowed us out that afternoon, but already small drifts were forming between the banks on either side of the driveway. I got out of the car and walked around to the back door of the house to find a three-foot snow drift blocking the entrance. Basil waited in the car while I cleared a path to the door with the blue plastic snow shovel we had had the presence of mind to buy on the way up. Inside, the house was cold, and there was the musty smell of disuse in the air. When I opened the fridge, the kitchen filled with the odor of spoiled onions and sour milk. Basil looked pale and shivery as he parked himself at my insistence in the Boston rocker beside the big window in the living room. At least the view was good, better than his mood, I could tell, as I made three trips to the woodshed and set to work getting a fire going in the stove.

Maybe we shouldn't have come. Basil wasn't supposed to do anything strenuous in the cold, which meant we'd have to stay indoors. The little house that had been so bright and welcoming all through the summer and fall now seemed strange and cold. At least Harpo was happy, running in frantic circles through the deep snow until the fur on his belly and his paws were encrusted with icy pellets, which he proceeded to rub all over the living room carpet. This, at least, elicited a laugh from Basil, who was beating himself up because he felt weak and useless. I made us a cup of tea, and we huddled close to the stove, waiting for its warmth to spread through the house.

The silence was awesome—a white hush that seemed deep and bottomless. It was not yet 5:00, and the evening stretched out before us pale and dark—a long silent tunnel. I shivered and got up from the fire to start dinner. Out of habit, I leaned over and flicked on the kitchen radio to drown out the silence. Basil was at his post, book open, dog on his lap.

"Don't," he said in a low voice.

"Don't what?"

"Turn the radio on."

"But it's almost six, the news will be . . ."

"Listen."

I hit the off button and resumed chopping, holding my breath and listening hard. The silence, I realized, was anything but. At first, all I could hear was blood pounding in my ears, and then, as I slowly exhaled, the humming of the refrigerator and the occasional crack of coals in the stove. I listened harder and I thought I could hear the house groan under the weight of all its years. Then, outside, the rising grind of a transport truck gathering speed on the distant highway.

"So much for peace and quiet," I said.

"No," said Basil. "Behind the noise, what do you hear?"

I listened. There it was. Nothing. A complete and utter silence, as deep as a well. And all the truck and fridge and fire sounds were like pebbles dropping onto its implacable surface. Basil got up and opened the back door; he put his head out into the blackness and drew in a great gulp of frost-laden air. I left the vegetables simmering on the stove and went to stand beside him, looking out at the emptiness, no stars, no sounds now except the sighing of the wind. I put my arm around his waist, and as he leaned into me just a little, I could feel something tight inside him letting go.

I like to think I pushed Basil into buying Bedlam over his reservations and hesitation and objections because I knew what the place would come to mean to him. I like to think that, even as I worry that the whole project nearly killed him. Now, on this dark and wintry night, I knew my instincts had been right. That weekend was a turning point for Basil. For the first time since his surgery, he felt glimmers of the

strength that would gradually and not without setbacks come back to him in full force.

We both slept deeply in the cool, dark, silent house. Saturday was brisk and sunny—or at least what passes for sunny on a winter day in Singhampton. "Yup, it pretty much snows every day up here from November on," Lyle Kedwell had warned us in September. And sure enough, a stoic sun held its ground high in the sky as lazy squalls of flurries blew along the ridge and over the river, ebbing and flowing all afternoon like muslin curtains blowing in the breeze. It was beautiful to watch from the sofa in the living room, warmed now, if not by the woodstove (which was proving inadequate to the task of heating our uninsulated house), at least by the sunlight pouring in through the south-facing windows. I was longing to be out in it but worried that the cold air might put too much of a strain on Basil's healing heart.

He wanted to go out in the cold. Gone was the tentativeness he had shown during weeks past at the prospect of any physical exertion. His happiness at being here seemed to be obliterating his fears, and rather than encouraging him and trying to raise his spirits, I found myself urging caution in the face of his enthusiasm. We bundled up carefully, even though it wasn't really that cold, nothing like what was still to come as "real" winter approached. The snow on the fields was too deep to walk through, so we took the blind side road that ran along the deep gorge made by the Mad River as it rushed down the side of the escarpment. On one side of the road, the gleaming fields lay smooth and unblemished as sheets of white satin. On the other, stands of red pine swayed in the breeze. A generous blue sky arched overhead.

About a mile from the house, I persuaded Basil we should turn back. We had only been out for about twenty minutes, but it was the longest walk he had taken—and the most exhil-

arating by far. The clear, cold air and the enormous sky were like a tonic, filling both of us with exhilaration, making us giddy with the simple miracle of being alive.

In the weeks that followed, as the snow piled higher and higher around our little house, we spent as much time in Singhampton as my work would allow. I gave Basil a pair of snowshoes for Christmas, and he took to them like, well, like a rabbit to winter. The cumbersome-looking contraptions are anything but. They don't glide like skis, but they go where no skis would dare venture. Instead of driving to areas where there were groomed, marked trails, we could step out the back door and head out across the frozen river and up over fields thigh-deep in snow. Our first winter in the country made me remember what I had known as a child but had somehow forgotten during a twenty-year urban exile: that winter doesn't have to be an ordeal, a messy inconvenience to be endured until summer rolls around again. Up here in Ontario's high country, the season is undeniably harsh, but it is also big and beautiful and as varied as a month of Sundays in August. When we bought the house, we had planned to help finance the project by renting it to downhill skiers in the winter; the private club Devil's Glen is very nearby. But we soon changed our minds.

Basil's horizons shifted that first weekend in the country—from a cramped postoperative perspective that pinched his body and spirit to a broad, expansive view of what lay ahead. It wouldn't always be easy, but for the first time, he could see for miles and miles into the chilling but beautiful future. As the pain of his incision lessened and his mood lifted, his body unclenched and his shoulders straightened ever so slowly. His gaze shifted from inward to onward. Many things contributed to his recovery, which was never really in doubt, but in Basil's mind, the long view that winter of broad, snow-covered fields and skeletal trees woven

into the sky on the far side of the river played the biggest part.

Back at the house that first afternoon, Basil declined a nap, and while I brought in more wood for the fire, he began preparing the vegetables for the weekend food project. Winter is soup season, and we wanted to have lots of homemade stock on hand in the freezer. But instead of the chicken stock we always make, Basil wanted to switch to vegetable stock. I admit that I was lukewarm about the idea. There is no way, I thought, that boiled vegetables could ever come close to the beauty and comfort of long-simmered chicken broth. Then Basil suggested that we make our stock from roasted rather than raw veggies. The result is a richly colored and flavored broth that tastes almost meaty thanks to the caramelized vegetables.

Roasted Vegetable Stock

This is a rough guide only; you can use whatever vegetables you like.

3 leeks, trimmed, washed, and sliced
3 carrots, peeled and cut into chunks
2 celery ribs (with leaves if possible), sliced
1 medium onion, quartered
1 parsnip, sliced
1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 gallon cold water
1 tablespoon black peppercorns
4 sprigs fresh parsley
2 bay leaves
2 sprigs fresh thyme
Kosher salt

Preheat oven to 450°F. Toss the leeks, carrots, celery, onion, parsnip, and tomatoes with the olive oil and spread out in a single layer in a roasting pan. Roast for 1¼ hours, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are a deep golden brown.

Transfer the vegetables to a large pot and deglaze the roasting pan with a small amount of wine or water. Add the browned bits to the pot. Add the water, peppercorns, parsley, bay leaves, thyme, and salt to the vegetables. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer for 45 minutes to 1 hour until liquid is reduced by half. Strain. Makes about 2 quarts.

Barley-Lentil Soup

This vegetarian soup is an excellent winter lunch for a large crowd. I serve it when my sister Kate and her family, who are all vegans, come to visit. It's delicious served with homemade brown bread and butter. It's also an excellent way to use up the odds and ends of dried legumes and grains lurking in the back of your kitchen cupboard. This recipe calls for barley, split peas, and lentils, which do not have to be presoaked, but you can substitute whatever you have on hand.

2 quarts roasted vegetable broth
1 quart water
2 onions, coarsely chopped
2 carrots, sliced
2 celery ribs, sliced
1 14½-ounce can tomatoes
2 garlic cloves, minced
½ teaspoon dried thyme
⅓ cup pearl barley
⅓ cup split peas

⅓ cup lentils
2 cups chopped green cabbage
1 large potato, cubed
1 medium zucchini, cubed
1 cup turnip or butternut squash, cubed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Chopped parsley for garnish

Place the broth, water, onion, carrots, celery, tomatoes, garlic, and thyme in a large pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 1 hour.

Add the barley, peas, and lentils and cook 40 minutes longer. Add the cabbage, potato, zucchini, and squash and simmer another 40 minutes. Season with salt and pepper and serve. Makes 12 servings.

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There Ain't No Cure for Life

Basil is lying on the rug in the family room imagining he is a field. His arms are solid stone fences laced with wild grapes; his head, a stand of oak trees; his rolling torso, a bed of late-summer alfalfa and Queen Anne's lace. A breeze, warm and soothing, riddles the trees and flowers. The field is immovable and serene, a place of peace and beauty and yet alive with deer grazing and geese flocking overhead.

Sometimes the sky above is a tumble of gilt-edged clouds, sometimes it is as dark as the belly of an elephant, sometimes as blue as the flash of a bunting's wing.

Being a field is reassuring for Basil. It shows him that stability is possible even in the face of relentless change. It evokes peace even as it is buffeted by all kinds of weather. Twenty minutes of being a field is almost enough to silence the chatter in his head, at least for a while. Certainly it is enough to extinguish the glitter of anxiety that has been nibbling at the edges of his recovery.

It seemed that the stronger he became physically, the more his fears preyed on him. Basil thinks that in the weeks immediately following his surgery, he was in a state of mental numbness; all his energy was focused on the fragility of his healing body. As he slowly gathered strength, his traumatized

psyche began to turn its attentions on itself and the old anxieties began to assert themselves with increasing vigor. In a way, he was prepared for this. When he was in the hospital before the operation, we had lots of time to think about the ways he could live a healthier life. Heart disease is considered a lifestyle disease; it is associated with unhealthy behaviors like smoking, lack of exercise, poor diet, and obesity.

A fat, sedentary smoker has a very good prognosis for controlling his disease *if* he stops smoking, loses weight, and gets regular exercise. Basil's heart condition was obviously not tied to his lifestyle. So what could he change? Well, one big thing he needed to do was learn to manage stress. Most cardiac rehabilitation programs, including the one Basil would begin three months after his surgery, emphasize diet and exercise. They recognize stress as a factor in heart disease and counsel patients to take steps to reduce stress in their lives by working less and relaxing more. But they offer few tools for actually dealing with it.

I was convinced that what was killing Basil was the peculiar (to me at least) way that he processed the zigs and zags of day-to-day life. He seemed to have no internal mechanism for calming himself down, which meant that even minor setbacks escalated into insurmountable obstacles. Say he was running late for work in the morning and couldn't find his car keys. Instead of taking a deep breath and quietly going over in his mind where they might be, he would begin tearing around the house, verbally berating himself for his stupidity, until he either found them or borrowed mine. By the time he left, his shirt would be soaked with perspiration and he would be seething with anger that would take the better part of the day to dissipate.

He had no patience for tasks that required any kind of precision or manual dexterity. As soon as the slightest thing

went wrong—the window wouldn't slide into the slot, the hinge wouldn't catch, the door wouldn't fit—he would get mad, call himself an idiot, his hands would start shaking, and he'd give up in frustration, his blood pressure over the moon. This pattern was so ingrained that even the prospect of fixing something could bring on the shakes, as though he was reacting to something that hadn't even happened, and inevitably he'd botch the task. Of course, he had no insight into his behavior and simply assumed he was an incompetent lout.

And although this makes him sound like one, he is anything but. His temperamental quirks make him difficult at times, but in the main Basil is kind, generous, loyal, affectionate, and funny. Before his heart attack, his tendency to overreact was something I was learning to live with. Afterwards, I realized it was essential that he change. It wasn't stress that was killing Basil; it was his reactions to it that were doing the damage.

Rather than learn to cope with stress, Basil's strategy was to avoid it as much as possible. This made him into a rather fearful person who tended to avoid new situations. The resulting lack of experience eroded his self-confidence and fed his insecurity, making him even more anxious. He was (and still is, to some extent) nervous, jumpy, and overly emotional.

The doctors often said that Basil's heart disease could be put down to bad genes, but I have always wondered whether he inherited a gene for high blood pressure or a temperamental gene that causes his blood to boil at the slightest provocation. In any case, it was obvious to both of us that he learn to control his reactions. But how?

I first learned about mindfulness meditation in a newspaper article I read a couple of years after Basil and I were married. The article was written by a woman I knew slightly who

had learned to control her lifelong chronic back pain (the result of scoliosis) through a form of meditation called *mindfulness*. Educated and skeptical, she was the last person I imagined latching onto an airy-fairy miracle cure. Although the article didn't go into a lot of detail about what exactly mindfulness is, the writer's endorsement of it was enough to make me wonder at the time if it might not be something that would help Basil with his demons.

One evening after visiting him in the hospital while he was waiting for surgery, I walked to the subway with my cousin Suzanne, who is a nurse. I asked her if she knew anything about mindfulness, and she said she had heard good things about it as a treatment for anxiety disorders and chronic pain. In fact, Suzanne told me, our health insurance would cover the cost of the eight-week program with a doctor's referral.

I went home and did some research and found that mindfulness meditation is an intensive program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine at the stress reduction clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Based on the centuries-old tradition of Buddhist meditation, mindfulness is designed to teach people suffering from a whole range of diseases and disorders—from headaches and back pain to cancer, heart disease, and AIDS—how to take control of their health and find a degree of peace of mind. It is not a cure; rather, it uses meditation to heighten self-awareness and insight and teaches practical techniques for using increased self-knowledge to master stress rather than letting it master you.

The "practical" part was important because I expected that mindfulness was going to be a hard sell with Basil, who is deeply skeptical and automatically suspicious of any kind of "groupthink." I had real trouble picturing him sitting in a

room full of people meditating for hours on end. This turned out to be a failure of imagination on my part. Basil was so chastened by his brush with death that he was ready to try anything that might improve his prospects. And since quitting smoking and losing weight were not options, a little mind control seemed worth a try. He raised the subject on his first visit to Dr. Crawford after his surgery. She, too, was sketchy on the details but was happy to write Basil a prescription. She even found a mindfulness clinic only a few blocks from where we lived run by a woman named Lucinda Sykes.

Basil called right away and was asked to come in for an evaluation to see if he was a suitable candidate for the program. I dropped him off outside a nondescript three-story office building on College Street on a raw and windy afternoon, promising to come back in two hours after he'd had his interview. It was his first outing other than doctor's appointments since he'd come home from the hospital. He had been sullen, even irritable in the car, and his face was already etched with fatigue from the effort of getting there. I wondered what sort of impression he'd make on Sykes, whose voice on our answering machine had been bathed in serenity and whose speech was peppered with phrases like "the way of awareness" and "being present in the moment," which set tiny alarm bells off in my head. I wondered what Basil thought but decided it was better not to ask.

I needn't have worried. He made it through the interview and the various questionnaires and signed up for the next available spot, which was not for another two months. In the meantime, he was instructed to buy a set of practice tapes that are used as guides to the meditation techniques and to read Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living*. The unusual title is taken from the movie *Zorba the Greek* where a character asks Zorba if he has ever been married. Zorba replies: "Married? Of course. Wife, house, kids, everything. The full

catastrophe." I like the hint of irony, the idea that a rich and rewarding life is fraught with difficulty as well as joy. The notion was free of the piety that so often clings to recipes for spiritual well-being.

In embarking on the mindfulness course, Basil was making a significant commitment in terms of time. The program consisted of one weekly three-hour group session with Sykes and about fifteen other people. He was also expected to meditate using the practice tapes for forty-five minutes a day, six days a week. At the same time as he started mindfulness, he began a cardiac rehabilitation program, which had a daily exercise component. And since both programs coincided with his return to work, he had to get up at 5:30 every morning to fit it all in.

By the time he began his mindfulness course, we had resumed our presurgery arrangement whereby he brought me coffee and the newspaper in bed each morning. I suppose I should have been out there with him or downstairs stirring the porridge and slicing the bananas for his breakfast, but he insisted he could do those things for himself. I've never been much of an early riser, so I burrowed further under the covers and fretted about the pressure he was putting on himself.

Still, the meditation was having an immediate effect on his mood and his behavior. By spending a chunk of time each day simply paying attention, which is essentially what mindfulness is—a way of looking deeply inward to gain insight and understanding—Basil was beginning to see how his responses to stress and pain controlled him rather than the other way around. Every morning he would do what in mindfulness parlance is known as a body scan.

While lying in a quiet place and listening to the tapes, Basil performed a mental scan of his body, starting at the tips of his toes and moving slowly, slowly up both legs to his pelvis, his abdomen, his chest, fingers, hands, neck, and face,

finally breathing out, like a whale, through an imagined hole in the top of his head. The exercise teaches concentration and brings the individual in touch with his body. In the words of Kabat-Zinn, "The body scan cultivates moment-to-moment awareness." Lucinda Sykes's softly modulated voice on the tape guided him through the scan inch by painstaking inch. As he dwelt mentally on each part of his body, he noted the sensations there, noted them not in a reactive way as you would normally experience soreness or pain or even a simple itch, but in a detached, nonjudgmental way. In the past, Basil's response to pain had been all out of proportion to the pain he was actually experiencing. A knuckle aching with arthritis was much more than that; it was also swollen with his fears of growing old and infirm. The body scan taught him not to load every sensation with the burden of past and present fears but to simply feel and listen to what his body was telling him. After each forty-five-minute session, Basil said he felt as though he were transparent. It was more than a state of deep relaxation, it was as though his body had fallen away. This might have been the first time he had ever allowed himself to really relax.

Once he had mastered the body scan, he only practiced it once a week as a kind of purification process. He did a twenty- or thirty-minute sitting meditation every day. We usually think of meditation as an attempt to empty the mind, but mindfulness is more concerned with increasing your awareness of your thoughts. It asks you to sit quietly and focus on your breath going in and out, and as the river of thoughts and sensations intrudes, to acknowledge each in a nonjudgmental manner and then gently pull the concentration back to the breath. The idea is not to stop thinking but to observe each thought and then let it go. In doing so, you become aware of each moment and less reactive.

The increased self-awareness bore fruit for Basil almost immediately. The first place Basil applied it was during his daily commute to Humber College. During the drive, a gauntlet of merging freeway lanes, massive transport trucks, and suicidal speeds, he sometimes experienced episodes of near panic. They would begin with a pain in his arm or shortness of breath that he feared was the beginning of another heart attack. As he contemplated what might happen should he pass out at the wheel, his fear and physical symptoms escalated. Only with immense effort was he able to talk himself out of pulling over to the side of the highway, not a good idea in the helter-skelter of heavy traffic. Good driving under these conditions demands a steady combination of fearlessness, confidence, and caution. Indeed, these are the elements of wisdom needed to navigate all that life throws in our way.

I suppose Basil's daily drive to work could be seen as a metaphor for the human condition. With the help of mindfulness, he was able to greet his rising fears as he would the huge trucks coming at him from all sides. He would breathe steadily and tell himself: "Yes, there is something to fear, but only if I lose control." Soon he began applying his self-calming techniques to all the stressful aspects of his life. On the job and at home, he was learning to control his emotions, something he had never really done before, if only because he was barely aware of his feelings. Now, as soon as the first ripple of anger or fear disturbed him, he was able to greet and take its measure before wading into the fray.

And the benefits of this were more than psychological. In effect, though we have never measured it, Basil was learning to control his blood pressure. High blood pressure can kill because as the blood surges through the arteries it damages them, creating fissures that act as collection points for the buildup of plaque caused by cholesterol in the blood. If one

of these deposits breaks lose and travels to the brain or heart, it is called a stroke. If the buildup is serious enough, it can block an artery and cause a heart attack. It was vital that Basil learn to manage his reactions to stress. He knew that this was the one thing he could and must change if he intended to live a long and happy life. And of all the steps he has taken toward recovery, Basil has found mindfulness meditation to be the most important. Its results were immediately salutary, and they put him squarely in the driver's seat. It is not a cure and, as we were to discover, has its limitations in managing stress, but mindfulness gave Basil an important handle to grab onto in his search for equilibrium.

With practice, this kind of meditation can become incorporated into much of the busyness of everyday life. My favorite is walking meditation, where I focus on the physical act of walking—the way my feet roll from the heel to ball to the toes with each step, the swing of my arms, and the sway of my shoulders. Or sometimes as I'm walking, I simply listen to the sounds around me, the squeak of my boots on the cold packed snow, the clang of a metal gate closing, a dog barking in the distance, sirens, horns honking, children laughing in the park.

To this day, Basil does a body scan once a week and he tries to meditate for twenty minutes or so every day. If this isn't possible, he tries to sit and clear his mind if only for ten minutes. Indeed, whenever Basil feels his anxiety rising, before an important meeting or as we are rushing around packing to go away for the weekend, he will take himself off to a quiet place—our bedroom with the door closed or the back steps leading into the garden—close his eyes and listen to his breath going in and out. And if that isn't anchor enough, he will imagine he is a field or even an immensely tall spruce tree, his tapered crown blowing in the wind while birds raise their young in the cradle of his boughs and squir-

rels chatter and feed on his cones and his roots reach deep and unseen into the forgiving earth.

Spicy Shrimp with Soba Noodles and Greens

Lucy Waverman has been tantalizing *Globe and Mail* readers with her recipe column for many years. For eight of them, I have been her editor and friend. This recipe comes from her considerable repertoire; it's one of our favorites and makes us feel very Zen.

Spicy dressing

1 tablespoon sesame oil
2 teaspoons wasabi paste
3 tablespoons soy sauce
3 tablespoons rice vinegar
3 tablespoons sake
1 teaspoon sugar

Noodles and vegetables

8 ounces soba noodles
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
2 tablespoons chopped fresh ginger
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
8 ounces large shrimp, peeled
2 cups sliced bok choy
4 green onions

Garnish

1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds
1 tablespoon slivered ginger (optional)

Combine the sesame oil, wasabi paste, soy sauce, rice vinegar, sake, and sugar. Set aside.

Cook the noodles in boiling water until tender. Drain and toss with 2 tablespoons of dressing.

Heat oil in a wok and stir-fry the garlic, ginger, and red pepper flakes for 2 minutes. Add the shrimp and stir-fry until they begin to turn pink. Add the bok choy and green onions and cook until just wilted.

Add the noodles and the remaining sauce and cook, stirring, until heated through. Serve garnished with sesame seeds and ginger. Serves 2.

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A Balancing Act

Humber College's campus sprawls along the banks of the Humber River north of Toronto on a flat, treeless tract of what a few decades ago was open farmland. Today, the former corn and wheat fields have been overtaken by that blight known as urban sprawl. A burgeoning mass of beige, brick suburban houses, strip malls, industrial parks, and fast-food outlets surrounds the motley tumble of glass and steel buildings that make up the college.

The only reasonable way to get to this oasis of learning in a desert of irresponsible urban planning is by car, and once you do, there is no place else to go. It is a curious limbo suspended between the twin ideals of our vibrant, bustling downtown neighborhood and the peace and beauty of our weekend getaway. For better or for worse, Basil was doomed to be a commuter.

Humber was started in the 1970s in response to the swell of baby boomers graduating from high school who were seeking a postsecondary education that would give them practical skills in a competitive job market. It and other colleges across Canada offered a results-oriented alternative to the degree-granting institutions. The college, with a student body of 14,000, offers diplomas in everything from nursing

to metallurgy to cooking and creative writing. But, in recent years, Humber, like many other community colleges, has been reinventing itself as a degree-granting institution. This has made the college hungry for people with postgraduate degrees to teach and administer programs.

One morning about six months before we learned Basil had heart disease, I was lying in bed sipping my coffee and reading the paper while Basil was getting dressed for work when I spotted an ad in the careers section. Humber College was looking for an Associate Dean, New Media.

"Hey," I said from my down-filled throne, "you should apply for this job."

"I have a job," said Basil as he lifted his chin and jimmied his tie a notch tighter around his neck.

"Yes, but you hate it," I said, waving the paper at him like a crackling distress flag.

He sat on the edge of the bed and began sifting through a small pile of socks. "Why is it that nothing ever matches?" he grumbled and began rifling though his drawer to pull out a new pile.

"Bas," I insisted. "Read this."

He reached for the paper with a sock-covered hand.

"Hmm," he said. "Sounds just like me."

"You should apply for it."

"Okay, then I will," he said, wagging a naked forefinger at me from the hole in his sock. "And if I get it, guess what I'm going to treat myself to first?"

It was a long shot of course. Neither of us had ever met anyone who actually found a job by answering an ad in the newspaper. But Basil was ready for a change, and he had nothing to lose by sending along his résumé. At the time, he was working for a major Canadian daily newspaper, *The National Post*. His title was business development manager, a post he had held for almost four years. This too had been a

career change. Previously he had worked for *Maclean's*, a national news magazine, on the editorial side as chief librarian, head of research, and director of new media. It made for an impressive résumé, especially since he had not one but two master's degrees, one in library sciences and the second in a relatively new field, information studies.

He didn't really hate his job at the *Post*. Indeed, he had taken it because it put him in a position to move up through the ranks on the publishing side of a dynamic upstart paper that was started in the late 1990s by the legendary media mogul Conrad Black as a challenge to what he saw as the limp-wristed, left-leaning media in Canada. The first few years of the resulting newspaper war were heady times, especially for Basil and me since we worked for rival organizations. But the *Post*'s invigorating start stalled when Black abruptly sold the money-losing paper, renounced his Canadian citizenship, and set up shop in London society as the free-spending Lord Black of Cross Harbour.

The *Post*'s new owners, who were new to the newspaper business, began jettisoning whole sections of the paper and divisions of the company in an effort to staunch the flow of red ink. Basil's division was merged with another and there were rumors it might be sold altogether, all of which made for a jittery and unstable workplace. Everyone who could was bailing out before the ax fell, and Basil felt certain it was only a matter of time before his head was on the block.

This situation continued for more than a year and, as we know now, culminated in Basil's heart attack about two months after he'd sent his résumé to Humber College in the faint hope it might bear fruit. By this time, his own boss had been let go and so had several of his colleagues. There's little doubt that the escalating tension and uncertainty contributed to Basil's heart condition. When Humber called to invite him in for an interview, he was delighted and surprised. Basil has

considerable experience in both traditional and electronic media on the publishing and business side, but his teaching background was limited to a few publishing workshops. Still, it sounded like a fabulous job; he would be responsible for the journalism, new media, film studies, and photography programs at Humber. A lot better than the snake pit he was squirming around in at the time.

In the days before his interview, Basil's nerves were as taut as piano wire. Because the remote suburban wasteland north of the airport where the college is situated is alien territory to us, Basil and I decided to take a test run on a Sunday afternoon so that he would know where he was going the following day. It took us almost forty minutes to get from our leafy little downtown neighborhood to the sterile industrial lands at the north end of highway 427. We took the Finch Avenue exit and drove east past billboards, a construction equipment dealer, a strip mall, and row on row of identical semidetached houses huddling behind an eight-foot wooden fence.

There was no sign of anything that resembled a college. At the first set of lights, Basil turned left, and we drove past more factories and car dealerships. Beyond the squat buildings and parking lots, empty farm fields spread out against the flat line of the horizon.

"Maybe we should ask someone where it is," I suggested. The air in the car was crackling with tension; Basil was getting frustrated, and in those days it didn't take much.

"There's no point," he growled. His face was red and a pearl of perspiration slid down his temple. "We've taken a wrong turn. I'm going back."

"Basil, we've come all this way. Don't be crazy. We'll find it; we just need to ask someone."

This wasn't going to be easy; there wasn't a human being in sight. Just as we were about to make a U-turn on the

broad, empty street, a city bus lumbered toward us and stopped at a glassed-in transit shelter. A man stepped off and stood on the windy curb looking as though he had just dropped in from a distant planet. We pulled up beside him, and I rolled down my window.

"Hi," I said, "can you tell us where Humber College is?"

I could feel the steam coming off Basil as he sat seething beside me in the driver's seat. (Remember, this was before he had learned to "be in the moment.")

"Oh no, sir," said the man in a singsong Indian accent. "You have made a wrong turn. Over there," he waved vaguely in the direction we had come from. "Go back and turn right at the second set of lights. You can't miss it. It's a very big place."

Sure enough, we backtracked and eventually came to a street named Humber College Boulevard that wound through another cheerless housing development to the campus itself. We drove around until we found the parking lot and the building Basil had been directed to for his interview

Once again, I was puzzled and disturbed by how quickly Basil gave up in frustration at the slightest obstacle, but I put it down to apprehension about the interview. His anger disappeared as quickly as it had flared up, and he was cheerful and animated on the drive home.

"It's a good thing we did that," he told me the next day after an interview that even he thought went well. "I would have been late for sure. You should have seen the maze I had to negotiate once I got inside the building." His opening line to the five-person panel that interviewed him was: "Okay, I made it. Now where's the cheese?"

I think the joke got him the job. Yes, his résumé is impressive, but—his occasional temper tantrums notwithstanding—it is Basil's easy wit, sincerity, and ingenuousness that engage and attract people to him. He listens actively and is consci-

entious, kind, and generous. The other side of the coin is that if he takes a dislike to someone he lacks the ability to mask his feelings, and his hostility is palpable. While most of us learn early on to prevaricate, to grease our way through the workaday world with flattery, feigned enthusiasm, and necessary lies, Basil is incapable of this kind of "acting." He is completely straightforward and never "plays games," in either his professional or private relationships.

His new job was a complete culture change—from the private sector to the public, from the real world of journalism and business to the ivory tower of academia, from living and working downtown to braving the freeways everyday. And he had precious little time to adjust before he ended up in the hospital. Because he had been at his job at Humber for less than four months before his bypass surgery, Basil barely had time to learn where the watercooler was.

When he returned to work after his surgery, it was February and classes were in full swing. It was like starting a new job, and the learning curve was particularly steep for someone with no academic background to speak of. I'd like to say that his new job was a bed of roses, but of course it's never like that. And the world of academia can be particularly thorny. He eased himself in gradually. For the first two months, he took it easy, arriving at the office at 10:00 and leaving by 2:00, which had the added advantage of allowing him to avoid rush-hour traffic. His colleagues were generally solicitous. The impact of what Basil had been through was clearly visible; he looked thin and tired. What they couldn't see were the metaphysical changes, which were much more profound and lasting. He had confronted his own mortality, and he knew one thing: no job was worth risking his life over. This meant that he would not, could not, let the job take over his life. He vowed he would work no

more than forty hours a week and that he would find a way of not letting the inevitable politics and petty squabbles get to him. His mindfulness training helped considerably; it let him pull back and collect himself when things got tense. But it wasn't easy.

The challenge of finding a balance between home and work has become a modern-day cliché. We all talk about it, but few of us actually achieve it. And most companies and institutions pay little more than lip service to the idea. Workaholism, which I define not as an addiction to work but an addiction to spending long hours at the office, is still a quality most employers value highly. The assumption seems to be that the longer you remain at work, the more effective you are. No credit is given to the person who uses his time well, who can get the job done quickly and efficiently and get out the door on time. Nope. Leave the office by 5:00 and you're a shirker. Hang around the watercooler all afternoon and get down to work by 7:00 or 8:00 and you're a go-getter.

It took real grit for Basil to walk out of that office at 5:00 every afternoon, but that's what he did, despite the fact he knew his boss and many of his colleagues would still be around for hours. Has it hurt his career? Probably. But it certainly hasn't made him less productive. Many people complain about overwork, but Basil believes that, for most people, working long hours is a choice. It's like people who say: "Oh, I never read the newspaper. When would I have time?" But what you do with your time depends on your priorities. If reading the paper or going to the gym or spending time with your kids is important to you, you'll find the time. If not, you'll avoid them somehow—by staying late at the office, for instance.

They were pretty hard on him that first year. Hiring Basil, an outsider in every way, had been a deliberate attempt to

shake things up in a culture that had developed a kind of institutional hardening of the arteries. And shake things up he did, simply by being there. Staff who had worked at the college for decades were threatened by the new guy, and any changes he tried to effect in those early days often met with resistance that was almost aggressive.

"They're trying to kill me," he'd announce at the end of particularly frustrating days. Days when instructors would refuse to speak to him, when he was deliberately excluded from meetings, and anonymous complaints about him were lodged with the human resources department. It was a school yard for grown-ups that was no less vicious than the juvenile version. And Basil was no stranger to school yards. Because of his Legge Perthes, he was almost seven by the time he started school. Shy and sensitive, he spent his early childhood confined to a wheelchair reading while other kids were outdoors running around. Basil hated school from the beginning. Almost immediately, the resident bullies picked up on his insecurities, like a wolf-pack scenting blood, and they were on to him. Eventually he wouldn't go. As Basil tells it, the only time his father ever spanked him was out of frustration at his little boy's refusal to go to school. It's hard to imagine how a seven-year-old could get away with it—it shows how stubborn Basil can be—but he simply would not go. Truant officers were called, bribes were attempted, force was threatened, until everyone concerned agreed it might be best if he stayed home for a few months to cool off.

I look at pictures of Basil when he was a little boy, round-faced, a puckish grin, skinny arms and legs; he looks the way I imagine Oliver Twist might have looked, or Tiny Tim, or Little Jack Horner—endearing, spoiled, impossibly cute, utterly lovable. It's all still there: the giggle that bubbles like ginger ale, the laughing eyes, the incipient blush, the immi-

nent tears, and also the streak of toughness that was beginning to form like scar tissue even then.

Basil, the child, went back to school after a few months, but the bullying continued. He learned—painfully—to deal with it in his own way, by standing up to them and getting knocked down and then standing up again. Bullying, when we were children, was considered part of growing up; today, parents and educators take it a lot more seriously. By Basil's account, every school day was a hideous ordeal, but it couldn't have been worse than what was happening at home. First, his beloved grandmother, who lived with the family, died, and then his father's drinking escalated until he succumbed a year later to heart disease when Basil was barely nine. Nature took over the summer after Basil turned ten. For once his genetics worked in his favor. His father, for all his weaknesses, was a towering six feet four inches tall. Basil has never achieved those heights, but he's always been a big guy, and when he entered fourth grade in September after a summer growth spurt, he was suddenly bigger than all of his classmates.

No one picked on him after that. Bullies, as we know, are cowards, and the combination of Basil's size and his stubborn refusal to back down when confronted meant his enemies left him alone. The experience did not make Basil less vulnerable. It did not make him cruel. If anything, it has made him into a champion of the underdog. But he learned early on to stand his ground; he learned to fight back, and when he feels threatened, he has a tendency to come out swinging.

His new colleagues weren't trying to kill him. They were ostracizing the new guy because they were afraid of change. For them, Basil's heart surgery was past, it was over. They didn't stop to consider what effect their behavior might have on Basil. Why should they? He looked healthy enough. And anyway, bypass surgery is so commonplace these days that

people tend to minimize the impact of the event and expect that once the physical recovery is complete everything else will be business as usual. Because Basil looks fit and healthy, it's easy to think that he is the same person he was before his operation. Even I fall into the trap of thinking that he's "over" it. I forget that for Basil nothing will ever be the same. For the rest of his life, his ear will be turned inward and the sound of his beating heart will drown out everything else. He can't afford to let the school yard upset him; he knows that the bullies and cowards cannot hurt him because the real struggle is with himself.

I want him to scale back, to negotiate a four-day week, to think about early retirement. And all he does is make vague promises about working less. The irony in all this is that two years before Basil had his heart attack, I took a step to achieve the kind of balance in my life that now seems so urgent for him. Working full-time as a section editor at a newspaper means long hours and tight deadlines, and the stress was affecting, if not my health, certainly my well-being. The job left me with little time or energy to do anything else. And I wanted to write. With Basil's support, I decided to cut back to working three days a week.

The result has been less money, less stress, and an unpublished novel in my desk drawer. But oh boy, has it been worth it in terms of quality of life. I have Basil to thank for my sanity—and this book. So while I have both job satisfaction and time to pursue creative interests, Basil, the one with the heart condition, is still slogging away in the trenches five days a week. I am grateful, but I am also frustrated that he is not being more aggressive about changing his situation. It's all part of what seems to me a reluctance on his part to look after himself. At first, I pestered him endlessly: "Don't work so hard." "You have to get more exercise." "Why don't you take a few days off?" But I am beginning to realize that it *is* his

life, that I am not his mother or his nurse, and that I must maintain some kind of distance or I will drive us both into an early grave.

The one thing Basil is endlessly vigilant about is eating the right things. These two recipes make perfect dinner-party dishes, one classic, the other casual.

Salmon with Lentils

There are endless variations on this classic French way of serving salmon, but all of them include tiny, perfect du Puy lentils and tantalizingly crisp salmon skin. We eat a lot of salmon because of its high concentrations of omega-3 fatty acids. Combined with the high-fiber, high-protein lentils, this is perhaps the ideal heart-healthy meal. Because Atlantic farmed salmon has been found to contain high concentrations of PCBs, I try to buy wild salmon from the West coast when it's in season or organic farmed salmon if I can find it. Adding a small amount of ham to the lentils as they cook adds flavor and only a trace of fat.

The lentils

¾ cup French du Puy lentils
2 ounces ham (optional)
4 garlic cloves, crushed
1 celery stalk, cut in 3 pieces
1 jalapeno pepper, halved and seeded
1 shallot, halved
1 bay leaf
½ teaspoon coarse salt

The glaze

½ cup balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoon butter

The salmon

4 4-ounce salmon fillets, skin on
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
¼ cup flat-leaf parsley, chopped

Place the lentils in a saucepan with the ham, garlic cloves, celery, pepper, shallot, bay leaf, and salt. Cover with 1 inch of water. Bring to a simmer and cook over low heat for 20 minutes. Let cool.

Bring the balsamic vinegar to a boil, lower heat, and cook until reduced by half. It should be thick and syrupy. Remove from heat and add the butter.

Score the skin on each of the salmon fillets with a sharp knife to make a crisscross pattern about 1-inch apart. Sprinkle the fish with cayenne and salt. Heat a heavy nonstick skillet until very hot. Place the salmon in the pan skin-side down and cook until the skin is crisp and brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Lower the heat. Turn and cook 1 to 2 minutes more. Cook until the fillets are just opaque in the center.

Drain the lentils and strain, discarding the ham and vegetables. Season with salt and pepper. Spoon lentils onto four dinner plates. Top with salmon fillets and drizzle the balsamic glaze around the lentils. Sprinkle with parsley and serve. Serves 4.

Pesto Lasagna

We often serve this to guests—a much lighter, meatless version of traditional lasagna—and it is always a big hit. You can double the recipe if you have a large crowd. It also freezes beautifully.

Serve it with a green salad and crusty bread. Use light ricotta and low-fat mozzarella, and if you're pressed for time,

you can substitute a good-quality bottled tomato sauce for the homemade.

3½ cups tomato sauce (recipe below)
2 cups light ricotta
1¼ cups store-bought pesto
1 package of fresh (not dried) lasagna noodles
2 cups low-fat mozzarella slices
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Tomato sauce

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 small onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 28-ounce can plum tomatoes
1 tablespoon tomato paste

To make the sauce, heat oil in large saucepan and sauté onion and garlic until translucent, about 3 minutes. Add tomatoes with their juice and simmer for 5 minutes. Use the back of a wooden spoon to break up the tomatoes as they cook. Add tomato paste. Simmer for 5 minutes more. Set aside.

Meanwhile, mix the ricotta with the pesto in a small bowl.

Spread ½ cup tomato sauce in the bottom of a 9-by-12-inch ovenproof dish. Arrange ⅓ of the sheets of lasagna noodles over the sauce. Spread ⅓ of remaining sauce over the noodles. Top with ⅓ of ricotta/pesto mixture. Arrange ⅓ of mozzarella slices over pesto.

Repeat 2 more times with pasta, tomato sauce, ricotta, and mozzarella. Finish with any remaining tomato sauce and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Bake in a preheated 350°F oven for 40 minutes or until the top is browned and bubbling. Serves 4 to 6.

18

New York, New York

Cousin Roger scans the enormous plastic menu and turns to his six-year-old son, who is sitting beside him hidden behind his own copy of the menu.

"Well little Roger, have you made up your mind?" says the father in a deep, fatherly voice. Little Roger lays the menu on the table, a round table large enough to accommodate ten people, though there are only five of us having brunch on this cold and dreary Sunday morning in March.

Little Roger puts the giant menu down and peers through his glasses first at his father and then at his mother sitting on the other side of him. "I want," he says slowly and firmly in a miniature chairman-of-the-board voice, "a hot dog."

There is a long pause as the adults at the table take time to digest little Roger's request. The restaurant is Ruby Foo's, New York City's temple to Westernized Chinese food, famous for its sweet and sour spareribs and its chicken fried rice but not for its hot dogs.

Little Roger's mother, Andrea, who is a corporate lawyer with a Ph.D. in Spanish, looks at Basil and me apologetically and laughs.

"Little Roger," she begins sweetly, "this is a Chinese . . ."

"Wait," Cousin Roger commands. He motions to the waitress standing at the side of the large mostly empty dining room.

"Do you have hot dogs?" Cousin Roger asks.

"Hot dogs? Oh, no sir. No hot dogs."

Cousin Roger says nothing; he purses his lips and arches his eyebrows at his son.

"I want," little Roger repeats, the glare from his glasses obscuring his eyes, "a hot dog."

Cousin Roger is Basil's first cousin, his mother's sister's only child, and whenever we come to New York, we make a point of getting together with him and Andrea and little Roger. We first came to New York together on our honeymoon, and that time we stayed with Roger and Andrea at their spacious apartment at Broadway and 49th on the west side. Since then, we have damned the expense and ponied up for a hotel room.

It wasn't the feral cat that lives with them or the strange noises coming from Cousin Roger's study (he is a composer of what I can only describe as postmodern electronic pop music, mostly for movie scores) or the way the conversation seemed largely concerned with little Roger's intellectual prowess ("Andrea, get the camera, he's just built a tower with his blocks."), it's just that hotels are so deliciously impersonal, expensive yes, but private, private, private.

On this day at Ruby Foos we are grateful for the attention being paid to little Roger's food eccentricities. We have come to New York to celebrate Basil's birthday. It is our third visit here together and Basil's first big adventure since his heart surgery four months earlier. As fond as we are of Roger, Andrea, and little Roger, there are certain subjects we are hoping to avoid at this meeting. George Bush has just invaded

Iraq and Cousin Roger, a committed Republican, is sure to have strong opinions on the matter. Opinions that Basil and I, who like all good Canadians abhor confrontation of any kind, would rather not hear.

The difficulty of obtaining a hot dog in a Chinese restaurant seems a more palatable subject for discussion by far. Both Basil and I are tired; in an hour or so we will be on a plane back to Toronto. We have had three days of galleries and good food, a little shopping, and a lot of walking. Manhattan is our favorite city in North America. It embodies everything we love about America, the America of Superman and Jackson Pollock and Woody Allen. The America of the Empire State Building, the New York Yankees—and hot dogs, too. Big, brash, and urbane, it is like no other city on earth. Its immense energy is like a shot of adrenaline to those of us who hail from the mild-mannered wilds of urban Canada. Basil was turning forty-five years old on March 26. I decided to surprise him with a trip to New York.

I called his boss to tell him Basil would be taking a couple of days off before I booked our flights and hotel. Then I packed a bag for him, picked him up at work on a Thursday afternoon, and drove him to the airport. I don't know if surprises like this pose a risk to heart patients, but Basil absorbed the shock nicely. His biggest concern was that Cousin Roger might find out we'd been to New York without seeing him.

"We'll call him when we get there," I suggested. "I've made dinner reservations for two nights, so we have one free evening."

"They'll want to bring little Roger."

"Right."

Basil called Roger as soon as we arrived, and he suggested Sunday brunch at Ruby Foos. Perfect. We'd have a short visit with them and then catch a cab to the airport.

Weekend trips to New York are always a whirlwind; there is never enough time to do all the things we want to do. But I didn't want to wear Basil out on this trip, so other than a couple of dinner reservations I didn't make any plans. We'd get there and then decide how much we felt like doing. On previous trips, we have always made a point of taking in whatever was on at the MOMA and the Guggenheim. That was before Blockbusteritis hit the gallery world, an affliction that seems to have developed during the last decade. The major museums in cities like New York, Paris, Florence, even Toronto have been so successful in marketing their exhibitions that you now have to stand in line for hours in order to spend half an hour jostling hordes of like-minded art lovers to see a handful of paintings or sculptures. There are some works of art that are worth this investment in time—Michelangelo's *David*, the *Mona Lisa*, maybe—but it hardly seemed worth the aggravation to see another extremely popular Impressionist show at the MOMA.

Basil and I decided to avoid the big exhibitions and instead we spent a day wandering around Soho and the East Village visiting the galleries there, all of them free and blissfully uncrowded. We are by no means art critics, but we are curious and open-minded, and we saw some pretty weird and wonderful stuff—art that was fun and provocative. We stopped for lunch at a cool little sushi bar; we found an open-air flea market and paid a visit to the farmer's market at Union Square, an extravaganza of beautiful and unusual food.

The sad state of the Canadian dollar in recent years means that we never do much shopping in New York. Looking, we find, is just as much fun. And we'd rather spend our money on a couple of really good restaurants. The last time we were there we had dinner at a terrific French-Vietnamese restaurant called Le Coloniale. We also went to L'Ecole, the excel-

lent restaurant run by the French Culinary Institute. A five-course dinner there cooked by the students is one of the best deals in town. This trip, I wanted to choose places that would not compromise Basil's health too badly.

Restaurant meals are a real challenge if you're watching your diet. I once spent an afternoon in the kitchen of a posh Toronto restaurant called Bymark as research for an article I was writing for a tourism magazine. It was a busy Friday and the dining room was crowded with bankers and lawyers and their clients. The most popular item on the menu (after the chef's famous $35 hamburger) was Chilean sea bass steamed in a banana leaf. I could just imagine all those type A tycoons ordering the fish instead of a steak because, of course, fish is lower in fat and better for you in every way. This one was even steamed.

I watched as the sous chef at the fish station laid out a dozen banana leaves, carefully arranged julienned carrots, leeks, and lime leaves on each one, and topped the veggies with a fat fillet of pure white sea bass. Then, before folding the leaves into neat square packages for steaming, he placed on each fillet a slab of seasoned butter that was at least equal to a quarter of a cup per serving.

"Boy, that's a lot of butter," I said to the sous, who smiled and nodded as he wrapped up another package and tied it with string.

"That's why restaurant food tastes so good," he said. "It's the butter."

On another night in another fine restaurant called Avalon, while researching the same article, I watched the brilliant Toronto chef Chris McDonald prepare duck's tongue risotto for a private party of nine. He mixed tiny orange ducks' tongues, which you can apparently buy in Chinatown in bulk, into the creamy rice. And then, just before the risotto had reached that stage of perfection somewhere between biting

and silky, he dipped his wooden paddle into a bowl of softened butter and ladled about a pound of it into the pot.

What I know now is that many restaurants, even very good ones, use far more butter than you would ever dream of using in your cooking at home. That is, indeed, why the food tastes so good. So, while Basil and I have not given up on restaurants (we probably eat out about once a week), we are wary about where we eat and what we order. We gravitate to Southeast Asian, Japanese, and Latin American cuisines because they tend to use little or no dairy and a lot of fish and vegetables. For that reason, I made a reservation at Nobu in New York. This four-star restaurant is named for the chef, Nobu Matsuhisa, whose Japanese training is enlivened by a two-year stint cooking in Peru. The result is a completely original fusion of South American and Asian flavors and techniques. We ordered the omakase, a tasting menu featuring an array of Nobu's signature dishes, among them sashimi salad seasoned with jalapeno, buttery broiled black cod marinated in a miso-mirin glaze, and squid pasta with garlic sauce. All of it was unforgettable: the freshest fish, astonishing flavor combinations, and dazzling presentation. We were particularly delighted with the squid pasta, creamy, thick noodles of sweet and tender fish mixed with stir-fried asparagus and shiitake mushrooms bathed in a garlicky sauce—a simple and humorous dish.

The next night we dined at Union Square Café, a place as informal as Nobu is stylized. I chose it because Basil, in his heart, is a meat-and-potatoes guy, and the café is known for serving good food, simply prepared. The atmosphere was that of a neighborhood haunt, and you could tell that many of the patrons were regulars. The service was friendly, and the roast chicken (the true test of any kitchen) was crisp and juicy. We also tried an appetizer called spaghetti alla bottarga. It looked perfectly ordinary—like a dish of pasta

tossed with a few oven-roasted tomatoes and garnished with toasted bread crumbs.

"Mmmm. Try this," said Basil after sampling a forkful. I twisted a few strands around my fork. It tasted amazing, salty like seawater, browned, and buttery. It reminded me of a plate of spaghetti I had eaten in a small trattoria in Florence the year before. Just noodles tossed with what looked like bread crumbs. It was delicious, but I never found out what it was.

"What is it?" I asked Basil, who had ordered it. I guess he was feeling adventurous.

"I don't know, but it's delicious."

We asked the waiter. "Bottarga," he said. "Dried mullet roe."

"Dried mullet roe?" I looked at Basil. "Yum."

"It's a Sardinian delicacy," the waiter continued. "Italian caviar. Very expensive, but a little bit goes a long way."

A long way indeed.

After all our feasting, brunch at Ruby Foos with Roger and Andrea the next morning loomed before us like a bloated egg roll. I can't remember what we ordered—a lot of vegetables, I think, and several pots of tea. I do remember that Little Roger held his ground on the hot dog issue. "I want a hot dog," he kept repeating, until the maitre d' finally offered to go down the street to a nearby deli and get one for him. Cousin Roger and Andrea agreed to this, otherwise I suppose we would have had to leave.

While we waited for our food to arrive, Roger brought up the dreaded issue of "The War."

"I suppose you're wondering what we think about Iraq," Roger began. Canada, for once, had not fallen in behind its American neighbor, and we came to New York expecting to be treated in much the same way as that other dissenting nation. France was being vilified. (Remember freedom fries?)

Basil opened his mouth to make as innocuous a response as possible, but Roger wasn't finished.

"We are appalled," Roger began. Andrea's chin was bobbing up and down in rapid, jerky agreement. "We think this war is insanity, a stupid, disastrous, tragic mistake." And with that, he was off. Every time he paused, Andrea jumped in and picked up the rant. Basil and I listened and nodded and sipped our tea. Little Roger busied himself with crayons and a coloring book his parents had brought along. Only time will tell who was right about Iraq: George Bush or Cousin Roger. Or maybe it won't. After all, the lesson Basil and I learned at brunch that day, as we watched our Chinese waiter set a large hot dog and a bottle of ketchup in front of little Roger, is that the victor is he who sticks to his guns.

Nobu's Squid Pasta

This sounds weird but it's absolutely delicious. A great low-fat, low-carb dish—or so I thought. We liked it so much at Nobu that I looked up the recipe on the Internet only to find it called for 5 tablespoons of butter! This is my adaptation using olive oil and just 1 tablespoon of butter for flavor. I think it's better than the original.

12 ounces fresh squid
16 asparagus spears, cut into 2-inch lengths
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 large garlic cloves, sliced thinly
8 shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and sliced
3 tablespoons sake
2 tablespoons soy sauce
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 tablespoon butter

Cut squid tubes lengthwise so that they form two or three flat steaks. Score the surface of each crosswise at ⅛-inch intervals with a sharp knife. Cut squid lengthwise into ¼-inch strips.

Cook asparagus in boiling water until just tender but still firm. Drain and rinse with cold water. Set aside.

Heat oil over high heat in a heavy skillet. Add squid and garlic and sauté 1 minute. Add asparagus and shiitakes and sauté until squid is cooked through and mushrooms are tender, about 2 minutes.

Add sake, soy sauce, red pepper flakes, and butter. Boil until sauce thickens, about 1 minute. Serves 2.

Spaghetti alla Bottarga

This is my adaptation of the appetizer we had at Union Square Café in New York. Good gourmet food shops should have bottarga, but if you can't find it, substitute aged pecorino Romano cheese.

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 cup oven-roasted tomatoes*
¼ cup tomato sauce
1 pound spaghetti
¼ cup flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped
Bottarga for grating
¼ cup toasted fresh bread crumbs

Combine olive oil, red pepper flakes, and garlic in a heavy frying pan. Sauté until garlic is beginning to turn brown, about 3 minutes. Add tomatoes and tomato sauce and bring to a simmer.

Cook pasta in boiling salted water. Drain and add to the tomato mixture with the parsley. Toss over high heat for 1 minute. Divide among four bowls. Sprinkle with grated bottarga and bread crumbs. Serve immediately.

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* To oven-roast tomatoes, cut 1 pound of plum tomatoes in half lengthwise. Remove the seeds. Toss them with a tablespoon of olive oil, 1 thinly sliced garlic clove, and a little salt and pepper and place cut-side down on a parchment-lined roasting pan. Roast in a 200°F oven for 4 hours.

19

Wild Things in Spring

I have taken to carrying a stick on our weekend walks. It's not a walking stick; it's what I call a mushrooming stick, a branch about four-feet long that I use to poke away at the soggy mat of dead leaves that plaster the ditches and forest paths in April and May. I am driving Basil crazy—stopping at sporadic intervals to leave the trail and peer into spring's mossy, decaying entrails. I am looking for morels, of course, those elusive fungi with their distinctive honeycomb shape that cost about $15 an ounce at fancy food stores. I am obsessed with unearthing my own cache of the little devils for several reasons. For one thing, I love the idea of finding and harvesting wild food, especially the first wild food of the season. Plus, their intense woodsy flavor makes them a bona fide delicacy, and finding morels has long been one of my personal holy food grails.

As a small child, I remember going morel hunting with my aunts, my father's two eccentric sisters, Sybil and Sonnette, who came every spring to the farm north of the city that I grew up on. They would take me with them to comb their "secret" spots, but they refused to tell anyone, even my father, where the morel patch was on his ninety acres of land. I was sworn to secrecy, but I remember exactly, and to this day I

could lead you to the place where the morels were. If I did, I feel certain we would find some peeking through a nest of dead grass along the collapsed stone fence near a derelict colony of wooden beehives.

But the farm was sold decades ago, and because I've never had the nerve to go back, I have cherished the idea of someday finding my own morels. It's the aura of secrecy surrounding them that makes them so special. If you are lucky enough to find a morel patch—and they are not easy to find—it then becomes your secret, conferring on you all the power that secrets do. The spring woods and fields, muted and brown, make the perfect camouflage for the small mushrooms, which range in color from beige to charcoal. Unlike other wild foods—wild leeks, cattails, dandelions, and all the berries, which are brightly colored and abundant when they make their brief appearance—morels pop up as sporadically and unpredictably as winning lottery tickets.

Seasoned morel hunters are notoriously vague about where to find them: "near rotting hardwood" or "they like abandoned gardens" or "clinging to old fence-lines." The truth, I believe, is that they could be anywhere and that successful morelers have a sixth sense, something like the special power of water diviners. The rest of us are doomed to keep searching until we get lucky. And believe me, everything looks like a morel when you've got them on the brain. Even though I'm superstitious enough to know that the likelihood of finding any while I'm actually looking for them is small, I cannot resist stopping every few moments as we make our way along the abandoned lanes and bare fields to scrape away at a clump of wet leaves here or dig around in a rotting log there.

We used to call this our cardiac walk when it was a five-mile, high-speed march designed to get our hearts pumping

good and hard. Basil has been diligently following the exercise "prescription" designed specifically for him by his coaches at the cardiac rehabilitation program he was enrolled in at Sunnybrook Hospital. Four times a week he was supposed to cover a prescribed distance in a prescribed amount of time. Each week, it seemed that the distance was getting longer and the time was getting shorter until, I have to admit, I was having trouble keeping up. Basil has very long legs, and he was very, very serious about this "prescription" thing. One might even say obsessive.

I went along because I reasoned it certainly wouldn't do me any harm to get in shape, and because I was worried about Basil, out there trudging along the snowy roads by himself. It was winter when we started the regimen. There we'd be, decked out in running tights and track shoes, toques pulled low on our foreheads, steam billowing from our mouths, the snow-packed roads squeaking underfoot as we rounded the bend past Dalton Ewing's house and turned left onto the blind line. The pace went like this: walk, walk, walk, run, walk, walk, walk, run, and so on. By the time the snow had melted on the roads in late March, we'd progressed to walk, walk, run, run, walk, walk, run, run. This sounds somewhat imprecise, but I was merely following Basil, who was equipped with a state-of-the-art pedometer, a stopwatch, and an understandably urgent desire to GET BACK IN SHAPE. I, on the other hand, was armed with a much shorter stride, a recalcitrant schnoodle, and a lifelong avoidance of any kind of regimented exercise. The truth is I hate jogging; I don't think I've run a mile without stopping since I was in high school. Despite this, I insisted on accompanying Basil on his cardiac walk, but as the weeks wore on and the walking part gradually shrank in direct proportion to the running part, I started to lose my momentum.

Besides, it was spring and so much was happening in the woods—the flowers, the birds, and, of course, somewhere down there with the slowly awakening slugs and shoots, there had to be morels. The problem was that I was holding Basil up. And he wasn't a very good sport about it. His time/distance prescription was so precise and he was so determined to follow it to the letter that even having to pause while our schnoodle lifted his leg on every second mailbox caused Basil to check his stopwatch and growl at us to keep up. Morel hunting was definitely not on.

One weekend in late May, friends from the city, Hamish and Patricia, and their four-year-old daughter, Zhi, came for the weekend. Patricia, a magazine journalist, was researching an article about Michael Stadtlander, a remarkable Toronto chef who left the city a few years ago to open a restaurant at his farm a few kilometers from Singhampton. Since then, the Stadtlander farm kitchen has been named one of the ten best restaurants in the world by a prominent U.K. magazine and has attracted serious foodies from around the world. With his commitment to using the finest local, seasonal ingredients, Michael has become the Alice Waters of Canada.

On Saturday afternoon, Basil and I planned to take Hamish and Zhi on a leisurely (noncardiac) walk while Patricia drove the short distance to Stadtlander's farm to interview the great chef. When she called him in the morning, he suggested that she might like to go morel picking with him in the afternoon as part of the interview. I was totally jealous. "Please, please," I begged, "pay close attention to where he picks them."

I was a little surprised that he still expected to find morels. It was May 31, very late in the season for a spring mushroom like the morel. I had given up my forays a week earlier thinking it was probably all over for another fruitless

year. But if Michael Stadtlander was still picking morels for his restaurant, there was hope. It was a thoroughly miserable day. All morning we had watched from the living room window as icy curtains of driving rain swept over the river and fields. By the time Patricia left to meet Michael, the sodden morning had turned into a cold, windy afternoon. Basil and Hamish and Zhi got out the Scrabble board. Harpo huddled on the sofa. Nobody felt like walking. Except me.

I grabbed my mushroom bucket and rain gear and headed for the woods. The trunks of the maple and beech trees shone black and gray, their budding branches shivering and dripping as a light drizzle continued to fall. Underfoot, the dark brown flooring of sodden leaves was interrupted every hundred feet or so by sporadic bursts of brilliant green, mini-oases of pungent wild leeks, a spring food so plentiful that we had been eating them for weeks already. I ignored their gaudy siren call and, head down, began once again poking gently through the decaying leaves, looking for signs of the timid morels. After half an hour or so, my water-resistant jacket had ceased to resist the enveloping dampness, my boots were soaking, I was chilled to the bone, and still no morels. I trudged back to the house; the morel and wild leek pasta dish I had been dreaming about would have to wait another year.

As I was peeling off my wet clothes, Patricia returned from her interview. She, too, had been out in the cold and damp, but somehow the bad weather made her look robust and happy.

"Did you find any morels?" I asked.

"Tons," she beamed, her brown eyes dancing. "Absolutely tons. A huge basketful." She spread her arms wide to illustrate the extent of Michael Stadtlander's morel bounty. "And some of them were huge, the size of tennis balls."

I stood there, still shivering, scowling at this news. "Did you happen to notice where he found all these giant morels?" I asked.

Patricia nodded. Most of their harvest took place in an old orchard.

"An orchard?" This was good news. Just beyond the woodlot, about two fields from where I'd just been, there were a few ancient apple trees in a thicket of hawthorn. I pulled my wet jacket from the closet.

"Where are you going?"

I opened the back door and stepped out into the gusting rain. "Morel picking," I shouted. But the answer, hurled over my shoulder, was swallowed by the bitter wind.

Over the bridge, across the field, and through the woods we went. This time, Harpo, despite his horror of rain, was accompanying me on my quest. I bent down to pat his curly gray head. Maybe if I ever found any morels we could familiarize him with their scent and teach him to search them out like a French pig rooting out precious truffles. The "orchard" I remembered was two farms over from our place, bordered by an open meadow on one side and a field of corn stubble on the other. I had to duck to enter the thicket of low thorn bushes surrounding a small stand of bare and wizened apple trees. The ground underneath them was smeared with brown apple carcasses in varying degrees of decomposition. Harpo began snuffling through the debris.

To my eager eyes, every rotten apple looked like a morel. After a few moments, my enthusiasm began to shrivel. What was I doing out here in the rain again? Who was I kidding? It was patently clear that I simply did not have morel karma; it was not to be. I was forever doomed to shell out a fortune for dried facsimiles of the wild delicacy.

Just then, Harpo stopped his slow survey of the area. His muffled snorts took on a staccato rhythm, his stubby tail began wagging like a hairy metronome. I looked down and there, not two inches from the dog's mud-covered snout, was, yes, it had to be, this time definitely, there was no mistaking it—a morel.

"Sit," I commanded in a loud voice. Harpo halted and looked up at me, but he didn't sit. "Sit," I repeated, this time a note of pleading creeping into my tone. Harpo looked down at the mottled fungus, then back at me. "Hmm," his expression seemed to say, "I wonder if it's edible."

"Cookie," I commanded. That got him. He jumped back from the mushroom and gave me his full attention. The trouble was I didn't have any cookies. I bent down and picked up a stick, hoping to lure him away from my first-ever morel. And thanks be to the god of wild foods, he allowed me to slip two fingers under his collar.

"Good boy," I crooned, offering him the stick, which he sniffed at with the disdain of a true connoisseur. Gently, I plucked the morel, about the size of a golf ball, from the wet earth. And as I did, out of the corner of my eye, I saw another one. And another, and another, until I had picked seven of the elusive little buggers and piled them carefully in my hat (in my haste, I had forgotten the bucket) and returned to the house feeling a little like Jason must have felt with his golden fleece.

Now that morel season is over, Basil and I have picked up the pace a little on our walks. I expect this situation to continue even in the spring. I will no longer feel compelled to stop and poke through every likely looking mound of dead leaves because now I have my own "secret" patch. And next year, who knows, maybe I'll show it to Basil—if Harpo approves, that is.

Pasta with Morels and Wild Leeks

You can make this with shiitake mushrooms and cultivated leeks. It will still be delicious but not nearly as special. Wild leeks (also known as ramps) show up in green grocers in April and May. If you have a chance to visit the country, maybe you'll find some yourself.

1½ cups white vermouth
8 morels (or shiitakes), washed and sliced (or 1 ounce dried morels)
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon butter
1 bunch (about 12–18) wild leeks, washed and sliced (or 3 cultivated leeks)
1 tablespoon garlic, chopped
1 pound fresh button mushrooms, sliced
¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Bring vermouth to a boil. Add morels. Set aside.

Heat oil and butter in a skillet. Add leeks and garlic and sauté for 2 minutes. Drain morels, reserving vermouth. Chop and add to skillet along with button mushrooms. Cook over low heat for about 20 minutes. Add reserved vermouth, parsley, and salt and pepper.

Serve over thin pasta such as angel hair or spaghettini. Serves 4.

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Falling in Love Again

Basil is lying on his back in the dirt. He is not moving. I am frozen with fear. The first thing I do, however, is move toward Becky, who has cantered to the far end of the riding ring and is now standing facing me, her head held high, reins dangling, a look of puzzled alarm in her eyes. "What the heck was that all about?" she seems to be asking.

"Are you okay, Bas?" I call out.

There is no answer.

Becky stands quietly and lets me gather up her reins. She seems relieved to have a human take charge—a calm and competent human, because even though my heart is pounding like a truck piston, I am trying very hard not to let Becky know.

She clearly didn't mean for any of this to happen, and she gives my arm a friendly nudge with her head as we make our way over to where Basil is still lying, unmoving, on the soft earth.

"Bas?" I say as we both look down at him. His eyes are closed. Becky, perplexed at how her master got from the saddle to the dirt so suddenly, puts her nose down near Basil's stomach and snorts lightly. A pigeon, perhaps the one whose sudden flapping in the rafters overhead caused the

mare to shy and lunge sideways, unseating poor Basil, coos softly above our heads.

When Basil announced that he wanted to take riding lessons, I was enthusiastic. Learning to ride was something he had dreamed about since he was a small boy. His brush with mortality made him realize that life was short and there were many things he wanted to do before he died. Basil's midlife crisis wasn't a little red sports car; it was a horse.

Although he had never ridden in his life, Basil had an almost obsessive love for these big, beautiful creatures. The house he lived in when we started dating was littered with horses—photographs of them, paintings of them, wood carvings, statues, wall hangings, decorative plates, and beer mugs.

"I think I detect a theme here," I said the first time he invited me for dinner. His place looked like my bedroom had during my own horse-crazy phase—when I was ten years old.

Basil had been apologetic. Some of his horse stuff was beautiful—a legless stone sculpture, a nineteenth-century racing print—but most of it was kitsch—a wooden model of a carousel horse and an overly sentimental watercolor of an Indian pony.

"My friends and family have caught on to the fact that I have this thing for horses," he told me. "Now everyone gives me horse stuff for my birthdays and Christmas." Sure enough, on his next birthday, his Buddhist cousin Barry presented him with a statue of a galloping horse, the kind you find in discount stores in Chinatown, carved out of unidentifiable red stuff, not quite marble, not quite plastic.

After that, Basil asked everyone to stop with the horses already. After that, it would be the real thing—or no horse at all.

Well, here it was: the real thing.

Unlike city-born and -bred Basil, I had grown up in the country and had ridden since I was a child. I got my first pony when I was three, and we had a barn full of horses throughout my childhood and adolescence. As an adult, I have lived mostly in cities, so I ride only when the occasional opportunity arises, but I have no illusions about the world of horses, the work involved, the expense, and the inevitability of falling off.

For some reason, Basil, who is a naturally cautious if not fearful person, is not afraid of horses. I think he has always invested them with a kind of mystical grandeur that in his mind would make it impossible for him to come to harm when in their noble presence. Sort of like horse as guardian angel, a myth perpetuated by legendary horses from Bucephalus to Black Beauty.

I love them, too, but it is not a romantic love. Horses are beautiful, but they are also big and fast—a lot bigger and faster than we are. Fortunately, they are stupider, too. Why else would a powerful 1,500-pound animal let itself be saddled and bridled and persuaded to perform all sorts of exacting maneuvers by a 150-pound weakling such as myself when it could just as easily avoid such a fate simply by running away or refusing to budge? This willingness, and in many cases eagerness, to cooperate with humans is one of the things that makes horses so compelling. When it comes to controlling a horse, the physical strength of the rider is of little importance. The trick with horses is to convince them that you are the boss, because as soon as they suspect otherwise, you're finished.

The relationship between the horse and rider is based on cooperation, persuasion, and mutual understanding. That's why equestrian events are the only Olympic sport in which women and men compete on equal footing. That's why a 100-pound woman can be a better rider than a 180-pound man. And it's why the world is teeming with little girls who love horses.

Indeed, on the blustery Saturday in April that Basil and I first wandered into the Creemore Equestrian Centre to ask about riding lessons, we were immediately impressed by the number of nine- or ten-year-old girls taking lessons in the indoor arena or grooming and tacking up mounts with a confidence that belied the immense difference in their sizes. There were no little boys around. To my surprise, the only group that rivaled the little girls in numbers was a handful of middle-aged men, who, like Basil, had apparently decided late in life to learn more about themselves by learning to ride.

Rob Hartle and his wife, Marcia, run the Centre, which specializes in dressage training. In dressage, the horse and rider work together to execute precise movements in response to barely perceptible signals from the rider with an almost balletic grace. At least that's the desired goal. Basil, who had never ridden in his life, had a long way to go.

From the beginning, Rob treated Basil with special care. His doctor had said riding would be fine, as long as he was careful. "It takes at least a year for your breastbone to heal fully," he had said. And since it was still only five months since the surgery, falling off would definitely not be a good idea.

Rob assigned Basil to Merlin, an experienced soldier of a horse known for his dependability and his exceptionally comfortable canter. All through the spring and summer, Merlin and Basil got on famously. Under Rob's careful tutelage, Basil learned to walk, trot, and canter, how to use his hands

and legs and seat to stop and go and change direction. Basil found riding utterly absorbing. During his hour-long weekly lessons, everything else was forgotten. Riding, he said, was the only thing (even more than meditation) that completely silenced the chatter in his head.

Even more important, riding was teaching Basil the importance of managing his emotions. It is vital to remain calm around horses, because a horse can sense your fear even before you do. And if he thinks you're afraid, he's going to be afraid, too. To be a good rider, you have to learn to act as though you know what you're doing even if you don't; you have to pretend you are not afraid even if you are. And you have to do this well enough to convince the horse that all is well and you are in charge. The only way you can achieve this is through heightened self-awareness, by learning to recognize and anticipate your fear or anger before the horse does, and then acting to control it. These are the same skills that mindfulness meditation works to develop.

By midsummer, Basil had decided that he wanted a horse of his own. It wasn't just the riding; he had fallen in love with the stable itself—the sweat and manure smells, the rustling, knickering sounds, the grooming and tacking-up rituals.

"Basil," the message on our voicemail in the city began, "Rob here. That mare I was telling you about. She's arrived and wait 'til you see her. She's a pretty nice girl."

As soon as he saw her, Basil fell in love for the second time in his life. Her real name, the name on her Jockey Club registration papers, is Uncontested. We decided her stable name would be Becky, after Becky Sharpe, the beautiful, plucky, and sometimes devious heroine of William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Beautiful and plucky she certainly is—a 16.1-hand-high chestnut with two white feet and a white stripe on her face. Not only is she gorgeous, the color of polished copper, close-coupled, and straight-legged, she is genuine royalty, a

thoroughbred mare descended from Northern Dancer and Affirmed, the last horse to win the Triple Crown.

The problem was that her owner, a veterinarian from a nearby town, was asking more money than Basil could realistically afford for his dream horse. The owner had bred Becky the year before and was keeping the foal. Pregnant herself with her first child, she wouldn't be riding Becky anytime soon, and she didn't want the expense of two horses.

Basil agonized, his cautious, frugal side warring with his impulsive, romantic side. I was ambivalent: yes, she was beautiful, but she was a thoroughbred—a lot of horse for a beginner like Basil. In the end, her obvious charms overrode my reservations and Basil's budget.

"What good are my savings if I'm not here to spend them?" he reasoned. He cashed in some mutual funds and wrote Becky's owner a check. It was an uncharacteristically reckless move for Basil, and though I do believe that he'll be around a lot longer than he thinks, I didn't do anything to discourage him. Somehow buying Becky, as impractical as it was, seemed a better investment in the future than some stocks in a portfolio.

Basil and Becky started out slowly. After four months of lessons on Merlin, he had progressed to the cantering stage, but it was back to the beginning with Becky. Walk, trot, walk, trot, walk, trot for hours on end, round and round the arena. It sounds boring, but it is actually infinitely complicated. Every movement of Basil's hands, legs, and body communicates something to Becky, who is so responsive that the slightest pull on her mouth or weight shift can throw her off her stride. Basil had to learn to concentrate very carefully, to exercise absolute control over his movements, and, above all, to relax completely without losing that control.

Becky has turned out to be proud as a princess and playful as a filly. Her stable manners are lovely and in the ring she

is alert and well schooled. She is, however, a very different creature from Merlin, the stolid, dependable veteran of a thousand riding lessons. Our Becky is not devious exactly, but she has a stubborn streak; she can be petulant, and she is definitely highly strung.

Which is why Basil is lying here on the ground while Becky and I stand over him wondering what to do.

Just as I am about to throw myself on his prostrate form and begin heart massage, Basil opens his eyes and smiles.

"Are you okay? Can you move?"

He begins to laugh, a deep, throaty, almost joyful laugh. "I'm okay. I just want to lie here for a moment," he says finally. Becky, losing interest, has begun nosing my pockets for possible sugar cubes. Basil, it turns out, is an expert at falling without hurting himself, something he learned to do in the days he studied Akido (a form of judo). I guess he was just lying there, you know, "being in the moment."

At last, he picks himself up and brushes the sticky, soft turf from his clothes. Then he takes Becky's reins from me, leads her over to the mounting block, and gets right back on.

Oat- and Wheat-Bran Muffins with Blueberries and Flax

Even Becky would approve of these healthy high-fiber muffins, which are loaded with her favorite grains. The oat bran reduces LDL (the bad) cholesterol; the wheat bran makes you regular. The blueberries and the flax are high in omega-3s and antioxidants. (Raspberries are also very good in these muffins.)

¾ cup all-purpose flour
½ cup whole wheat flour
¼ cup wheat bran

½ cup oat bran
¼ cup ground flax
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
¼ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon cinnamon
Pinch nutmeg
2 ripe bananas
1 egg
½ cup buttermilk or plain low-fat yogurt
1 teaspoon vanilla
¼ cup vegetable oil
½ cup brown sugar
½ cup fresh or frozen wild blueberries

Preheat oven to 375°F. Combine all-purpose flour, whole wheat flour, wheat bran, oat bran, flax, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Stir well.

In another bowl, mash bananas and whisk in egg, buttermilk, vanilla, oil, and sugar.

Stir liquid ingredients into dry ingredients until just combined. Mix in berries. Spoon batter into 12 small (or 6 large) nonstick or paper-lined muffin cups and bake for 20 to 25 minutes.

Hoisin Black Bean Flank Steak

Because it is so lean, flank steak is our number-one red-meat choice. It should be marinated for several hours to help tenderize it, and it's important not to overcook it or it will be tough. I love this marinade because it combines sour (lime juice), sweet (hoisin sauce), salty (black bean sauce), and hot (pepper flakes). Remember, the amounts given here are

guidelines. Taste the marinade as you make it and adjust the ingredients until you get a balance of flavors that pleases you.

Marinade

2 tablespoons hoisin sauce
2 tablespoons black bean sauce
Juice of 2 limes
2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
½ teaspoon hot pepper flakes
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 pound flank steak

Mix marinade ingredients well. Score the steak with a sharp knife at ½-inch intervals on both sides. Cut into four portions. Cover with marinade and refrigerate for four hours or overnight.

Preheat barbecue, grill pan, or broiler. Cook steak 3 to 4 minutes per side. Serves 4.

21

Family Matters

Basil took on a lot when he married me. Not only was he saddled with a self-absorbed and temperamental wife, he also waded into a swamp that in our family is not quite affectionately known as the R-factor. R stands for Ross, of course, and the term was coined by one of my three sister's ex-husbands. All of us, except our brother, who has had the good sense never to marry (though he has come close many times), can boast an ex. Even my mother has been married twice—the first time to my father, who stuck it out for thirty years before dying prematurely at sixty-nine of, what else, heart disease.

Mum was in the final stages of divorcing her second husband when he too died, allowing her to continue to assume the more respectable status of widow. She is old enough and Roman Catholic enough to experience a certain discomfort with the idea of being divorced. Her second marriage was even more turbulent than her first.

My former brother-in-law Allan, who was married to my sister Nicky for seven eventful years, began calling us the R-factor about twenty years ago during a two-week vacation in Mexico with Nicky and me and our brother, Oker. Night after night, the four of us had dinner together, and Allan was

subjected to the persistent and continual navel-gazing chatter about us, us, us that my family engages in whenever more than one of us is in a room together. Not once, I'm certain, did Oker or Nicky or I ask Allan about himself or his family or his life. I'm sure that even if he'd decided to fill us in anyway, he wouldn't have been able to get a word in edgewise. As a matter of fact, the only reason I remember he was even there was because halfway through dinner on about night three, Allan suddenly jumped to his feet, threw his rumpled napkin on the table, and began screaming at us.

"I can't stand it any more," he shrieked as we sat there, stunned into a long overdue silence. "You people are unbelievable. Don't you ever shut up? Do you ever talk about anything but yourselves?" He whipped his chair away from the table and disappeared into the tropical darkness with my sister hot on his heels. For the next four nights, Oker and I dined without them, feeling somewhat bewildered by Allan's hysterics. What could possibly have upset him so much? He was a stick really; Nicky deserved better.

And, indeed, her charms were such that he married her anyway. The marriage lasted longer than it might have, I'm quite sure, because they lived three thousand miles away in Calgary. And considering he only had to spend every second Christmas with us, Allan's jokes about the R-factor took on an easy jocularity. It was harmless really. So we talked a lot. About ourselves. So what? We were so interesting after all.

Some of the brothers-in-law seemed to think so. Nicky's second husband took it all in without complaint. My first husband did, too. He had known us since we were teenagers, and I guess he was used to it. The baby of the family, Dori, and her second husband live in Vermont and only visit a couple of times a year, so they are subjected to the R-factor in more palatable small doses. Dori's first husband was such a cad that we never really cared what he thought. And middle sis-

ter Kate's ex was a misanthrope who refused to have anything to do with us anyway.

Then there is my mother. Hard to describe Doris really. She has many charms, certainly. Her energy is not just boundless, it borders on manic. At eighty-two, she's still taking bridge and tennis lessons as though her skills at either are likely to improve. She has a scatterbrained, coquettish quality reminiscent of Lucille Ball that belies her advancing age. She also has a determination to behave like a bratty eight-year-old that has persisted despite the sobering effects of giving birth to and raising five children. As kids, we never really thought of her as a parent, more like the person in the kitchen banging the pots and pans around who might drive you to your riding lesson if she was in the mood. Much younger than my father, a Lorne Greene–like figure whom we revered, my mother was sort of one of the kids, but not really. The effects of growing up with such a mother are the subject of another book, but as adults, most of us, her children, have learned to regard her with a grudging, exasperated fondness.

It's the sons-in-law she's hardest on. Men, in all their obtuse glory, remain the greatest source of fascination to her, and the more arrogant and self-absorbed they are, the better she likes them. Basil, to her eternal frustration, is neither, which means she spends most of her time goading him with incessant questions about current events and the stock market, the answers to which she refuses to understand, until he is so irritated that he begins to resemble a facsimile of her ideal—somewhere between Pablo Picasso and Conrad Black.

Most daunting of all to a childless bachelor were my daughters, Leah and Meghan, the former at the time of our marriage a sweetly manipulative twenty-two-year-old university student, the latter, a sullen and artless nineteen-year-old just out of high school. I blithely assumed that both would be unreservedly delighted at the prospect of their

past-middle-age mother marrying for love and possibly squandering their meager inheritance on a younger man.

Last but by no means least imposing for Basil were my ex-husband, Jim, and his wife, Mary Jane. For better or for worse, and not just for the sake of the children but also because we have known one another such a long time, Jim and I are more like old friends than former spouses. The baggage of our divorce we have long since unpacked (that too is the subject of another book), and whatever resentments there were have melted into the exigencies of our respective new lives. We don't exactly hang out together—Jim and MJ live in a different city—but I find that I look forward to the now-infrequent occasions when our mutual involvement in our daughters' lives brings us together. We went through a lot together, Jim and I.

It was into this rich and not always savory stew that I brought Basil, whose own family seemed less complicated and smaller, in part because most of the previous generation had already died of heart disease, but also because those who were left didn't seem to be as prone as my family is to multiple marriages. Who knows what mysteries lurk in our genes?

I like to think we're doing marginally better on our second time around. Three of us have remarried and, so far, only Nicky has moved on from husband number two. I, for one, know a great deal more about commitment than I did when I was in my twenties. By the time I met Basil, I'd had a good long time to think about what went wrong, and this time when I said the words "for better and for worse" I really meant them, though little did I anticipate the state of Basil's arteries.

One evening a few weeks before our wedding, Basil and I sat together on a small sofa in the apartment of the woman who would perform our marriage ceremony. Reverend Arm-

strong had requested that we have three get-acquainted sessions with her before the nuptials. Basil held my hand and listened as I tried, as briefly as I could, to describe the intricacies of my family. When I'd finished, the Reverend looked at Basil, sympathy pouring like holy water from her clear blue eyes, and said:

"It's a lot, isn't it?"

He nodded wordlessly.

It *was* a lot. I had reached the age where I had begun to realize that I had more past than future. Indeed, I felt as though I'd already lived three distinct lives—my childhood and youth, my first marriage, my years of single parenthood—and that I was now embarking on a fourth life with Basil. Each of these lives has its own story and its own characters, each has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In marrying me, Basil has married all of that, too. I guess it's what Zorba the Greek meant by "the full catastrophe."

My family has come some distance from that dinner table in a Mexican hotel all those years ago—most of us make at least a show of interest in other people's lives—but the R-factor is still a formidable force. And I underestimated how something as commonplace as a marriage can upset the tenuous order of family relations. One new brother-in-law can change the mix drastically.

Five years of marriage allowed us to work out a way of containing the simmering tensions, which in true WASP fashion had never actually erupted into conflict. Even though Basil claimed he sensed hostility from some quarters, everyone was at least superficially polite most of the time. And when they learned about Basil's heart problems, sisters, brother, and children all put down their dull hatchets and rushed to enfold us both in a mantle of concern that was entirely genuine.

Still, in the immediate aftermath of Basil's surgery, he found it more difficult than usual to maintain his veneer of civility.

(I'm being very careful here to strike a neutral pose; it's the same pose I've been holding with difficulty since we married. Yes, some members of my family can be self-absorbed and cavalier about the feelings of other people, but my dearly beloved is often hypersensitive and a little too quick to take offense. I love them all, but occupying the middle ground in these situations is a bit like trying to stand up in a canoe.)

In the first few months after Basil came home from the hospital, the shaky edifice of brotherly indulgence that he had erected in his relations with Leah, for instance, started to crumble. I was doing everything I could to fashion a stress-free environment where Basil could go about the very vital business of getting stronger. But there was only so much I could do to protect him, especially from himself. In those postoperative days, Basil's view of life was sometimes dark and brooding, and there were occasions when he projected his internal demons on the external world.

One evening in the darkest days of December, Basil and I met Leah and my mother at a neighborhood restaurant for a quick and casual Sunday dinner. The place—sort of an upscale pub—was filled with noisy young people. I was happy to be out of the house and the minimum-security prison that my kitchen had become. Mum and Leah, both talkers, were chatty and bright-eyed. For the first time since Basil went into the hospital, the cocoon of tension I had been living in began to unravel, and I had a brief and liberating illusion of normalcy. It didn't last long. I am always attuned to Basil's moods, and I soon sensed, as we scanned the menu in the low-lit room, that his spirits were sinking as fast as his blood sugar.

While three generations of girlhood engaged in loopy, meaningless banter beside him, Basil slumped in his seat, glowering at the menu as though it were a draft notice or worse. My stomach tightened. Of course, a pub had been the worst place we could have chosen for dinner. There was nothing he could safely eat, and he was still at that stage of recovery when a French fry looked about as comforting as a hand grenade.

"Is everything okay?" I leaned over and whispered in a meek voice. Basil glowered at me. The waiter appeared to take our order. I quickly opted for the bison burger (it's supposed to be leaner than beef) and a salad (no fries). When my mother ordered liver and onions, Basil swallowed, his mouth tightened, his eyes narrowed. Leah was so busy nattering on about her life as a London socialite (she'd just come home for Christmas) that she had barely glanced at the menu. She drew breath for a couple of seconds and applied herself to the task.

"Ooh," she chirped, "I know what I want."

She flashed her blue eyes at the waiter and grinned. "The *poutine* please."

Basil glared at her and through clenched teeth in a barely audible voice he asked for the grilled trout with a salad. "Hold the dressing," he muttered.

Poutine [pronounced *poo-teen*] is Quebec's dubious contribution to the world of junk food. In its traditional form, it is a heart-stopping agglomeration of deep-fried carbs and animal fat: French fries draped in melted cheese curds and slathered in thick brown gravy. Squeeze on a little ketchup and, depending on your point of view, you've either got most of the food groups covered or you've got cardiac arrest in a paper cone. Normally sold in fast-food joints, for some reason variations of this strange culinary cultural phenomenon

have started turning up on the menus of high-end restaurants, with chefs who should know better substituting the cheese curds with raw-milk cheddar or the gravy with foie gras. The version Leah ordered was pretty traditional; it came in a paper-lined basket, and the waiter plunked a bottle of Heinz down on the table as a chaser. All in all, great hangover food.

While we waited for our food to arrive, Leah and my mother kept up a lively banter about nothing much, which I tried to take part in. Basil sat in ominous silence. It seemed to me that he was taking Leah's dinner selection as a personal affront. His lips were set in a tight thin line, and every so often he would fix his stepdaughter with a look that stabbed me right in the heart. Did Leah notice? Apparently not, because she continued to rattle on cheerfully. When our dinner arrived, she dug into her *poutine* with great gusto. Still, I thought I could detect a slight edge in her voice. Maybe she sensed the tension and was trying to keep things light and bright, or maybe, in true R-factor fashion, she was completely oblivious to Basil's seething hostility. Or maybe I was the hypersensitive one and the tension was all in my imagination. Maybe Basil was simply tired.

In any case, the fear that Leah and Basil were going to come to blows ruined my dinner. Or maybe it wasn't very good in the first place. Lean as it is, bison hasn't much flavor. Maybe I should have ordered the liver and onions.

Basil and I were both under a lot of pressure; he was still weak and in a fair amount of pain, so every outing was a big deal. I was trying hard to be calm and steady, to be a buffer between Basil and the world, like an extra layer of skin. But the effort was costing me more than even I knew at the time. By the time we got home, I don't know who was more tired. I do know that our first small family thing had not been an unqualified success. Basil in his vulnerable state had overre-

acted to imaginary slights. Fortunately, nothing happened, but the tension between my husband and my eldest daughter is not going to go away—ever.

It's not all bad though. Fast-forward six months to a damp and coolish June weekend when the weather and Basil were greatly improved. Leah was house-sitting for two weeks at her friend Bruce's big old farmhouse nestled in the woods on two hundred rolling acres east of Toronto. Just by coincidence, Leah and I and her sister, Meghan, had lived in the very same house for about three years shortly after I separated from their father.

That was eighteen years ago. At the time, the house, called Vogrie, was owned by Trent University in Peterborough. The university leased it to me for a nominal sum because they wanted someone on the premises to keep an eye on the eccentric and valuable collection of art and antiques, which the late owners had bequeathed to them along with the property. Those years were a mixture of magic and mayhem for the girls and me. A time of endings and beginnings, of dislocation and division. Leah and Meg were eleven and eight when we moved into what was then a shabby, cavernous monument to Victoriana. Amidst the peeling paint and cobwebs, the creaking stairs and hidden passages, the paintings, antiques, rare books, and exotica from around the world that had been amassed by the late owners lurked the ghosts of a generation of sturdy farmers. The house was a remarkable haven for us, and my memories of that time are tinged with a strange mixture of sadness and gratitude. Vogrie afforded a pair of imaginative young girls lurching through a painful family breakup an escape into a parallel universe that would give Harry Potter pause.

As much as I regret those dark days and the pain that both my children will carry with them always, I have the small satisfaction of knowing that their childhood memories will for-

ever be enlivened by the delightfully haunted corridors of that old house and the deep and mysterious forests that surrounded it.

When at the age of twenty-seven Leah became friends with the man who bought the house from the university a decade after we had moved on, it seemed as though Vogrie's magic was reaching out to us over the intervening years. And when he offered her a chance to stay there for a couple of weeks while he was in New York, she naturally couldn't resist the opportunity to revisit a crucial part of her childhood.

When Leah invited Basil and me for a weekend, we jumped at the chance. I had been regaling Basil with tales of Vogrie for years, and he was eager to see what the fuss was all about. The new owner had spruced things up considerably but without compromising Vogrie's character. It's amazing what a coat of paint will do. He'd also renovated the kitchen and the upstairs bathrooms. All of the treasures we had lived with had been sold at auction years earlier, but Bruce was an art collector too and had filled the house with a spectacular array of paintings and sculpture. The place has shed its Miss Havisham decrepitude; today, Vogrie is like *Great Expectations* realized.

We spent the first afternoon of our visit lounging by the swimming pool—another postsale addition—plotting the dinner we had planned for the following evening. Vogrie is about seven kilometers from the town where Leah and Meghan grew up. Her father still lives there. And it just happened that, on the weekend we were staying with Leah, Meghan had made a surprise visit from Ottawa. When she learned that Leah was staying at Vogrie, she couldn't wait to drop over. Leah was proposing that we invite them all for dinner. Her boyfriend, Michael, was driving out from Toronto, and he had offered to pick up live lobsters for a family summer solstice feast.

Lying back on one of Bruce's striped lounges, I looked down the length of my prostrate body over my toes to where Basil was doing lengths in the clear blue pool. I smothered a sigh. It wasn't fair really to put him through that, a dinner party with my former husband and his second wife *and* our grown-up children. Basil had met Jim and MJ plenty of times before, and the encounters had been more than cordial, but they had been brief encounters, not full-blown social events. It was barely seven months since his surgery. Maybe it would be better if Basil and I had lunch with Meg and went back to the city early. Surely the girls would be more comfortable without all of us there. And Leah's boyfriend, Michael, didn't know us that well. Would he really want to deal with such an unconventional family affair?

But the anxious mutterings of my inner worrywart were overruled. Basil was game, and in the end the evening was not just fun but will go down in the family annals as a Memorable Meal. Maybe it was the company, I mean how often does a fella get to have dinner with his wife's ex-husband? But truly I think it was the food. A group of people, no matter how unlikely the chemistry, cannot help but bond over a platter of steaming boiled lobster. It is a food celebration that is at once primal and civilized, and the joyous messiness of cracking into the cooked crustaceans is guaranteed to lower inhibitions at the same rate as it raises spirits.

Michael arrived with the bounty—two crates of live lobsters—which he stacked on the floor near the stove, where Harpo sniffed and startled at the intermittent clacking noises coming from within. While I made a rice and pea salad and Leah mashed avocados for the guacamole, Basil brought two giant pots of water to boil on the stove. Whenever we have live lobster, Basil appoints himself chief executioner, and each time he dips one of the flailing creatures into the roiling cauldron, his eyes tear up and he emits a soft wail of real grief.

The boiling of the lobsters is for Basil a complicated ritual and one that costs him—the man who loves spiders—a great deal. Still, it is a price he feels he must pay—his way of paying homage to the creatures that will be our dinner.

I know how macabre this all sounds, but when you're having live lobster, there's no glossing over the fact that something has to die so we can eat. It's as close as contemporary diners get to the realities of the food chain. And Basil, no shirker, wills himself to look death squarely in the face. It's only right, he'd say. And somehow, the intensity of it all gives a metaphysical edge to what otherwise is just dinner. Somehow it connects us not only to the meal before us but to one another as well.

Michael ended up as chief photographer, immortalizing the evening with a group photo of the six of us—Leah and Meghan with their two sets of parents—laughing and embracing for the camera. It's gone into my family album, the one I've been keeping since Basil and I got married. I sometimes wonder what our ancestors or the archivists who come upon this photo a hundred years hence will think about a culture where differences can be set aside and an unlikely group of people can come together, if only for a few unusual hours, as a family of friends.

Leah's Garlicky Guacamole

Whenever we have my family over, we ask Leah to make her famous guacamole. This recipe makes lots, but it goes fast.

Buttery, ripe avocados are high in fat, but it's good fat. They are the perfect indulgence for people like Basil. We slice them on salads and spread them on sandwiches, too. They are also a good source of vitamins A, C, and E and potassium.

8 perfectly ripe avocados, peeled and seeded
6 cloves of garlic
4 limes, juiced
2 ripe tomatoes, seeded and chopped
½ cup cilantro, coarsely chopped
2 jalapeno peppers, finely chopped
Your favorite hot sauce to taste

Place ingredients in a large bowl. Mash everything together with a potato masher. Transfer to a yellow ceramic bowl and serve with blue triangular corn chips. Garnish with a jaunty sprig of cilantro. Makes about 4 cups.

Kate's Carrot and Ginger Soup

My sister Kate is an organic farmer in the Caledon Hills north of Toronto where we grew up. Her vegetable garden is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. She and her three children are also strict vegans. I asked her to contribute a recipe for this simple and delicious soup, which she often brings to family gatherings.

Kate says, "This is a no-fat recipe. Braising the shallots in water instead of sautéing them in oil makes absolutely no difference to the taste. I use shallots because they are milder than onions, and I grow lots in my garden. I also usually wait to make this soup in late fall after the cold weather has really sweetened up the carrots—sometimes digging them up in December from under straw and snow."

1 cup finely sliced shallots or onions
2 tablespoons water for braising
5 to 7 medium carrots, finely sliced
1 to 2 tablespoons finely chopped ginger
3 cups water

1 tablespoon maple syrup
Salt and pepper

Braise the shallots over low heat in 2 tablespoons water in a nonstick pan until soft, adding more water if necessary. Stir in the carrots and ginger. Cover and cook for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add the water and maple syrup. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer, covered, for 25 to 30 minutes until the carrots and shallots are really soft. Cool the soup. Puree using a hand blender, season to taste, reheat, and serve. Serves 4.

22

The Fear of Fear Itself

The house was empty. A listless, blue flame licked one of the rear stove elements. There was a scattering of crumbs on the butcher block, a smear of coffee grinds on the counter, a small stack of plates beside the sink; the dishwasher door was open. I'd been away for two nights and the place was a mess. And now Basil had evidently taken the dog for a walk and left the stove on.

He's a little absentminded, my Basil. I sighed and turned off the gas. Despite the evidence of recent occupation, the house felt heavy with emptiness, like a moment frozen in time.

I had expected him to be here when I got home; it was the first time since Basil's surgery nine months earlier that we had been separated, and I wondered how he had made out. I'd missed him.

Still, three days in Ottawa visiting Meghan on her birthday had been fun. I hardly ever see my youngest daughter it seems. And she'd just been through a bit of a wrenching time, breaking up with the man she'd been living with for two years. For the first time in her life, she was living alone in a small apartment downtown. She was shaky but happy to be

getting on with her life, and I had been looking forward to taking her on a spa weekend. We both needed the break.

Basil had been in good spirits when I left on Friday to catch my train. He had a lunch appointment downtown, so he had decided that, instead of going all the way out to Humber that morning, he would go to the gym for a workout. It had been months since he'd been to Hart House; commuting out to the college every day and spending weekends in Singhampton meant that he'd had to drop one of his favorite routines. Before I left, I reminded him not to overdo it; he'd passed his last stress test with flying colors, but other than his power walks, he hadn't been doing much strenuous exercise.

I wondered how he had done without me. Not that well judging by the state of the kitchen. I'd half hoped he might have met me at the train on his way back from Singhampton. A shimmer of irritation ran through me.

The message light on the phone was blinking. It was Nora.

"Cessie, I don't want you to be alarmed," said the voice on the answering service in a tone that was thick with gravity, "but Basil is in the hospital. He's fine; they're doing some tests. Call me and I'll fill you in." She paused. "And don't worry, we have the dog."

"Oh Jesus, no." Waves of something like nausea rippled inside me. My fingers shook as I struggled to punch Nora's number into the phone. Then, I listened, hardly daring to breathe as she explained what had happened.

Basil had gone to Hart House for his workout on Friday as planned, but while he was on the treadmill, he had a peculiar sensation in his chest, not painful exactly but as though something went "clunk" inside him, like a heavy thud on his left side. Suddenly he was sweating profusely and gasping for breath. He sat down for a few minutes and the symptoms subsided. Instead of doing anything right then he got dressed

and, still shaky, kept his lunch date. All through it his mind was in overdrive. Had he had another heart attack? By now he wasn't sure. He felt fine, his heart rate seemed normal; it was probably nothing.

He had planned to pick up Harpo at the house after lunch and drive to Singhampton. He was looking forward to a quiet weekend in the country, lots of reading, walking, and riding lessons. But although he felt better when he got home, the numbness in his arm persisted, and he decided to spend the night in town. The next morning he started out early.

Three times on the drive north he had a change of heart and actually turned the car around and headed back to the city, then reconsidered and headed out again. "Don't take any chances," barked a shrill little voice in his head. It was the voice of fear, the voice that Basil had been trying to silence all these months. "Go to the hospital, now," the voice fairly shrieked.

But as soon as he turned the car around, the sight of the wall of skyscrapers rising on the horizon as he headed back into town dampened his rising panic and his insides began to unwind. "This is crazy," crooned another voice in his head—a voice that sounded so sensible, so serene, the voice of reason. "You're fine; you're getting all upset over nothing. Don't worry."

Finally, the calm, reassuring voice prevailed, and Basil made it to Singhampton. After unloading the car, he decided to take Harpo for a walk. Off they went, man and dog, over the bridge and into the fields on the other side of the river. They had been gone no more than ten minutes when Basil was overcome with dizziness. His heart was pounding in his chest and his left arm was numb. Terrified, he turned back, but by the time he reached the house, he was feeling well enough to go to his riding lesson. On the way over in the car, he began to feel peculiar again—light-headed, short of

breath. By the time he arrived, he was dripping with sweat and there were pains shooting down his left arm. He stayed long enough to tell Rob that he didn't think he could go through with the lesson, drove back to Singhampton, and phoned Nora. She and Dave jumped in their car and in an hour and a half they had picked him up and were heading back to Toronto.

Nora drove Basil straight to emergency, and they admitted him right away. They checked his vital signs and found nothing wrong but decided to keep him overnight for observation. The next morning, after they sent him home, he went to Nora's to pick up Harpo, who had stayed the night at her house. (This is when he left the stove element on.) Nora gave Basil a cup of coffee, and because it was a beautiful day, she suggested they take the dog for a walk on a wooded trail that ran near her house. While they were walking, Basil began to perspire and feel dizzy. His breath was coming in short gasps and the pain in his arm was back. He was terrified, and he insisted that Nora, who was freaking out as well, take him back to the ER. She did, and that's where he was when I got home from Ottawa.

Most of this story Basil related to me after I showed up at his bedside. I felt terrible, of course, because I had stupidly been out of contact with him for two days. Meghan had just moved into her new apartment in Ottawa and her phone wasn't hooked up and our cell phone was with Basil.

Basil's bed this time was a cot in the emergency ward, where he would spend the next three days. A year earlier, I had made light of similar symptoms Basil was having—with nearly fatal consequences. Still, I felt certain that there was nothing wrong with him and that what he was having was an anxiety attack. I was reluctant to say this to him. By the time I got to the hospital, he looked exhausted and frightened; it had been a hair-raising weekend for him, so I kept my mouth

shut and tried to console him as best I could. This proved to be difficult. Toronto was in the midst of a SARS outbreak at the time—a lethal flu virus that had slipped into the country from China had turned the city's hospitals into quarantined fortresses. Nine months earlier when Basil had been in for his surgery, visiting hours were not strictly observed, and family and friends could pretty much come and go as they pleased.

Now only immediate family were allowed in to see patients and only between the hours of 7:00 and 9:00 in the evening. At the door, you were required to sign in, wash your hands with disinfectant, and don a mask, which you were not allowed to remove for the duration of your visit. To make matters worse, there were no beds available on the cardiac ward, so Basil was relegated to a cot in the brightly lit, noisy emergency ward. On the second day, he asked for a shower, but the duty nurse advised him not to since staff used the only facility available to clean up the homeless people and drunks who inevitably made their way to the hospital in the middle of the night. Getting something to eat was another challenge. If I had been allowed in more than once a day, I would have gladly taken Basil food. As it was, the best he could do was scrounge a sandwich now and again from the harried and overworked hospital staff. The emergency ward was not actually on the regular three-meals-a-day schedule that applied to the rest of the floors. He also had no access to a phone or a television.

It was hellish. His symptoms had disappeared, likely because of the sedative they had been giving him, and a stress test and an EKG showed no abnormalities. I think one thing that got him through it was the book that Nora had tucked into his bag. It was the then-newly released Harry Potter novel. Every evening when I went in to see him, there he'd be, the doorstopper of fantasy fiction spread open on his

raised knees like a literary amulet protecting him from the twenty-four-hour fluorescent reality that lay beyond the flimsy curtained cubicle.

Nora, understandably, was sick with worry. When I told her what I still hadn't told Basil—that I thought he had been having anxiety attacks—she was skeptical. She had seen him in a cold sweat gasping for breath, and she had been as convinced as he was that he might drop dead. Joanne was more open to the idea. A couple of years earlier, her husband, Bob, had had similar episodes after having minor surgery to clear his carotid artery.

"Tell him to get a grip" was Joanne's less than consoling reaction.

He was finally discharged again and a few days later went to see his cardiologist Dr. Rukowski, who could find nothing wrong but decided it would be prudent to order another angiogram. "If it was anyone else, I'd put it down to anxiety," he told Basil. "But with your history, I'm not taking any chances."

The day of the test, Basil was so keyed up that the nurses decided to double the dose of tranquilizers he was getting. This time it was the fear of the procedure, which is not without risk, that was upsetting him. Basil was beginning to realize that his fear had set a series of events in motion that he'd have given anything to stop. But not going through with the test would have left him with uncertainty about what had happened when he was at the gym. Even though he was beginning to accept that his symptoms were caused by fear, the conviction that something bad had happened was still strong.

He had had a very bad scare. Much later, I found a crumpled sheet of paper in a desk drawer in the country. It was a letter Basil had written to me as he waited for Nora and Dave to arrive to drive him back to Toronto. "I think I may have

had another heart attack," he wrote. "I so wish that we had had more time together. Good-bye, Cessie."

A week later, he went in for the angiogram. The test showed plenty of oxygen-rich blood was flowing as freely as mountain streams to Basil's beleaguered heart. The resident who performed the test told him that while there was some narrowing of blood vessels in the area, the four grafts were holding up beautifully and whoever had performed the surgery had done an excellent job.

Time, as Joanne had so elegantly put it, to get a grip. But this proved more difficult than we expected.

"I guess it was anxiety," I ventured.

"Maybe," Basil conceded, but, despite what seemed to me to be incontrovertible evidence, he still didn't sound completely convinced. The psyche is a formidable force, and Basil's unconscious seemed bent on persuading him that something was wrong. The next Friday we headed once again to Singhampton. That weekend we had arranged to join a small group of neighbors on an organized hike along some trails at a nearby conservation area and to gather afterwards for a barbecue at the community center. The day was perfect, a beautiful midsummer afternoon. The milkweed was in full bloom, and goldfinches careened through the overgrown meadows. I noticed Basil up ahead, deep in conversation with a woman he'd discovered was a fellow horse owner. Meanwhile, I was walking along with Heather, who lived across the road from us. A retired schoolteacher, she had become the environmental conscience of the community and was filling me in on a wind farm proposed for the area.

While we were talking, Basil suddenly dropped back to join us. He took my hand and pulled me to a stop just as the group was rounding a bend in the trail that led into the woods.

"Ces, I think we should go back. I don't feel right."

"Bas, are you sure?"

He looked terrified standing there with his hands crossed over his chest. His forehead shone with perspiration, and his breathing was rapid and shallow. I took his hand and told Heather not to wait for us, and we began walking back the way we'd come.

"Basil," I said as gently as I could, "I think it's happening again. You're having another anxiety attack."

His hand was gripping mine, the look in his eyes reminded me of a frightened horse. I stopped and turned to face him.

"Take a deep breath," I said. "It's okay, there's nothing wrong. You're not going to die."

He closed his eyes and breathed in, once, twice, three times.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. The pain in my arm is gone." He clenched his left hand and opened it again.

"I think we should go back to the others."

"You mean on the hike?" He started to shake his head.

"You're okay, Bas. Come on, we can catch up with them."

Slowly, still holding my hand, though not as tightly now, we began walking along the trail following the sound of the voices up ahead. By the time we caught up with them five minutes later, Basil was breathing easily and his color had returned. The rest of the afternoon and evening sailed by without incident. This time, Basil had beaten his panic, but it had taken all his will and my reassurance to calm him down; the sense that he was going to die had been powerful and terrifying.

The first consequence of his new enemy was that he stopped going to his weekly cardiac rehab sessions on Tuesday afternoons, insisting that it would be better if he took things easy for a little while. Nine months into the one-year

program, Basil was one of the star participants. His fitness level had quickly returned to almost presurgery levels: he was walk/running five kilometers in forty-two minutes on the indoor track with no difficulty, and he had begun weight training. Why his skittish unconscious should decide at this relatively late date to lose its nerve was a mystery. It may have had something to do with his being alone that morning at the Hart House gym; his rehab sessions offered the reassurance of a team of nurses and technicians who carefully monitored his vital signs before, during, and after his workouts.

Basil called Ann Minas, the director of the rehab program, and explained that he'd experienced a setback and wouldn't be attending for a while. Meanwhile, when he told Dr. Crawford what had happened, she suggested he try an antidepressant to help manage his anxiety. With some reluctance, Basil began taking a drug called Effexor, one of the many post-Prozac generation of SSRIs.

As much as his daily meditation was helpful, it apparently was not enough to keep all his demons at bay. The effect of the Effexor was almost immediate. Not only did the panic attacks stop, Basil's overall mood improved dramatically. For as long as we had been together, he had started the day under a dark cloud, tense and preoccupied with whatever predictable hell lay ahead. Now, suddenly, he was practically cheerful in the morning. Whereas the old Basil would frequently and easily slip into brooding angry silences with very little provocation and little or no warning, the new Basil was even-tempered and much more relaxed. He was the same, only different, and, I have to say, better in every way. At the time, Leah, who had been going through a difficult breakup with her boyfriend, was also taking Effexor. So, it happened, was my boss at *The Globe*. I used to joke that the three of them were on antidepressants so I didn't have to be.

I know that the use of antidepressants to treat anxiety and mild depression—conditions we used to think of as run-of-the-mill sadness or the stuff of ordinary life—is now routine. And not everyone thinks it's a good idea. God knows Basil was taking enough medications already; adding another seemed like the proverbial straw. Still, there was no denying the benefits. Studies have shown that when people are depressed their blood is thicker and more prone to clotting. Not only do antidepressants relieve depression, they also act on the blood, making it less sticky. And the fact that Basil was calmer, less anxious, and happier meant that his blood pressure was down, too.

Depression is the nasty little factor that no one in the hospital mentions. They sew you up after bypass surgery and send you on your way, armed with lots of cheerful advice about getting enough rest and exercise, about low-fat diets and losing weight and quitting smoking. But for many, that's the easy part, those are the things you can control. Doing something about how you feel is another matter. Anywhere from 40 to 60 percent (depending on which studies you read) of individuals recovering from a heart episode (including heart attack, surgery, or angioplasty) will experience some degree of depression, usually in the first six months. And the chances of a depressed heart patient having a recurrence or dying are three to four times higher.

So, it was vital that Basil's anxiety and depression be treated. His cardiologist had said nothing about why Basil had ended up in the hospital again. He had treated the physical symptoms, found nothing wrong, and sent his patient home. Our family doctor had listened to Basil's story, concluded he'd been suffering panic attacks, and prescribed an antidepressant before she, too, sent him home. But both Basil and I wanted to know more. For instance, it was clear to me that my husband has always been an anxious person, and it's

possible he has suffered from a low-grade depression for much of his life. How much, I wondered, had these factors contributed to his heart condition in the first place? And what, besides taking a pill, could be done to alleviate them? But whom could we ask?

Basil continued to "take it easy" throughout the fall and winter. He hadn't stopped exercising. He still went for twice daily walks with the dog, and we continued to hike and snowshoe on weekends in the country, but it was clear that Basil was reluctant to push himself very hard. Getting his heart rate up and keeping it there simply scared the hell out of him. The preventative benefits of cardiac workouts are well documented. Vigorous exercise not only reduces tension, it lowers bad cholesterol in the blood and helps keep weight down. A friend of ours likes to think of his arteries as pipes, and every time he gets his heart rate up and keeps it there, he imagines rivers of oxygen-rich blood surging through the plumbing, flushing and keeping his system clear and free-flowing.

But when I raise the subject with Basil, he is adamant. "I used to run, play squash; I worked out almost every day of my life, and I still had a heart attack," he told me. The episode in the summer was a false alarm, his mind playing tricks, but in his heart, Basil is still not so sure, and he's not taking any chances.

One day in late January, Ann from the rehab center called to see how he was. Very gently, she suggested that he come in to see them one more time. Basil's one-year rehab program (which he had only attended for nine months) would be over in a few weeks. To wrap things up for his own peace of mind and theirs, he should have a final stress test and assessment.

Basil agreed. Despite the long absence, his physical assessment went well; he passed the stress test with no trouble. When Ann asked how he was doing, Basil with some hes-

itation told her about his panic attacks and that he was taking an antidepressant, which was helping. She asked if he would be interested in speaking to someone, and she set up a consultation with Dr. Brian Baker, a psychiatrist with the Division of Behavioural Sciences and Health at the University of Toronto.

Talk therapy has not been easy for Basil. He has always found it difficult to talk about himself. As part of my research for this book, I have noticed, for instance, that when I asked him to describe to me what he was feeling during specific parts of his ordeal, he would grope for words and finally revert to the second person when talking about himself. (As in: "You feel as though you are walking around with someone holding a gun to the back of your head.") Now he was expected to express his deepest feelings (feelings long repressed) to a complete stranger. I don't know what goes on in Basil's sessions with Dr. Baker; it is not my place to ask. I like to think that his time there is something that is his and his alone and that in examining his life he finds some relief from the prison of the self.

I was in therapy myself for several years during a period of psychological floundering before I knew Basil, and I know that its effects are difficult to gauge. I used to think of each session with my shrink as a kind of emotional massage. At the time, it seemed like a lot of aimless talk and tears that left me wrung out yet oddly exhilarated at the end of each session. Although I couldn't see it then, I realized in the years that followed that I had in the process attained a small degree of self-understanding, enough to allow me to begin to forgive myself and to move on.

One thing that living with Basil's heart disease has taught us is that mind and body are inextricably linked. Psychotherapy has become one more weapon in the arsenal we

are using to fight a condition that is lifelong and incurable. If Basil can achieve insight and if that insight makes his blood less sticky, then so much the better. If understanding his fear can help him overcome it and start exercising again, then that's what he's going to do. It's a long twisty journey, but we take comfort in the knowledge that Basil is part of the first generation of heart disease sufferers who can look forward to living a long and normal life. It is, all in all, an excellent time to have heart disease.

Basil's Turkey Loaf

This is genuine comfort food, soothing to the body and the soul, and perfect for a cold winter evening. Serve it with mashed potatoes and a leafy green vegetable. You can find tinned chipotles in adobo (hot peppers in tomato sauce) in many supermarkets or Latin American groceries. They add a fiery smokiness to soups and sauces, and they keep in the refrigerator for months in a sealed container.

1 tablespoon olive oil
1 onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic
2 pounds ground turkey
2 eggs
1½ teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon pepper
1 jalapeno pepper, chopped
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
1 teaspoon powdered hot mustard
⅔ cup ketchup
1 cup fresh bread crumbs
2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Chipotle-tomato sauce

1 onion, chopped
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 teaspoon pureed chipotles in adobo
1 28-ounce can pureed tomatoes
Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro or parsley

Heat oil in a large nonstick skillet on medium heat. Add onion and garlic and cook gently for a few minutes or until tender. Combine turkey, eggs, seasonings, ketchup, and bread crumbs in a large bowl.

Add the parsley and the sautéed onions and garlic and mix together well. Place the mixture in a foil-lined loaf pan. Cover with foil and bake in a 350°F oven for 1 hour.

Meanwhile, make the sauce. Sauté the onions and garlic in 1 tablespoon oil. Add the chipotles in adobo and the tomatoes. Bring to a boil and season with salt and pepper. Simmer for 10 minutes.

Unmold the meat loaf, slice, and serve with the sauce. Garnish with chopped parsley or cilantro. Serves 4.

23

The Reins in Spain

We both needed a holiday. During our eighteen-month roller-coaster ride, we had been away once, our brisk weekend in New York. Now we wanted to take a real trip, and the only question was where.

In our years together, Basil and I had traveled as much as time and our modest finances would allow. There was our two-week trip to Ireland, another vacation exploring the west coast of British Columbia. Basil had given me a week in Paris for my fiftieth birthday. We'd been to the Florida Keys and the Mexican Riviera for short winter breaks.

I had been putting aside money for months for a really special vacation, and I was spending an embarrassing amount of time fantasizing about the trip of a lifetime that it seemed we definitely deserved. My Internet rambles had me contemplating Greek island cruises, villas in Italy, barges in England, vineyards in the south of France, bicycles in Vietnam. Every time I called Basil with my latest imminent adventure, he reacted with unedited enthusiasm. Every idea sounded better than the last.

"Do you really care where we go?" I asked one evening.

Basil thought for a moment. "No," he said. "Somewhere far away."

"Oh good, that narrows things down. What about New Zealand? It's far." Too far, it seemed to me, though I have always wanted to go there. The flight would be a hideous ordeal, and we had only two weeks. Not enough time to travel halfway around the world.

"Italy would be good," he said. "I've always wanted to see Rome, Venice, Tuscany . . . ," his voice trailed off like a tendril on a vine.

"The Mediterranean diet," I said.

"Olive oil, tomatoes . . ."

"Red wine, fagioli . . . all right," I said, "it's settled. I'll find us a villa near Florence, and we'll get a car; we can hike . . ." Visions of terraced hillsides and olive groves, of vine-covered walls and cobbled streets danced in my head.

The next day I began my search. Before long I happened across what sounded like a perfect place, the estate that had once belonged to Dante Alighieri. It was a vineyard, still run by the Alighieri family six generations later. One of the old buildings had been turned into beautiful apartments. It would be the Italian equivalent of staying in Shakespeare's birthplace. I quickly e-mailed them and found that one apartment was free in late May, when we planned to travel. The only problem was that the place cost a small fortune. But we deserved it, right? So what if it would probably take a lifetime to pay for our trip of same.

At the time, my sister Nicky had just returned from Spain. She had walked the Camino Real, a grueling five-week spiritual pilgrimage across the country. She looked incredibly fit and happy after all that exercise and had filled our heads with tales of the rugged and mountainous beauty of this southern European country. A hiking tour of Spain, I thought. That would be an adventure. I also knew that the country, especially in the southern province of Andalusia, was becoming

a food-lover's paradise. The region was famous for its tapas, little plates of local delicacies: sweet cured ham, mountain trout, nutty local cheese, superb olive oils, fresh sardines and anchovies, and excellent wines.

I searched the Internet, cruising the mountain villages, the streets of Seville and Cordoba, looking at apartments and villas, hotels, and guided walking tours. One day I came upon a small tour group based high in the mountains southeast of Granada whose name immediately caught my attention. Rustic Blue, it was called, a family-run company that arranged tours in the remote villages of the Sierra Nevada. As I looked over its site, my screen was suddenly filled with a breathtaking sight—a group of strong and proud dappled-gray horses standing in a flower-strewn meadow, their riders gazing off into the distance at a sparkling sea and the shadowy, white-capped peaks beyond it in the distance.

That's how I found Dallas Love—entirely by accident. Love, a middle-aged Englishwoman who has lived in Spain most of her life, owns and trains the twenty-five or so purebred Andalusian horses that she takes on riding tours through the magical mountains and valleys in a little-known region of southern Spain called Las Alpujarras. I immediately e-mailed Basil at work.

"Check this out," I messaged him.

"Let's do it" was his instantaneous response.

I e-mailed Dallas for more details and eventually booked a seven-day trip for late May. Normally I am wary of riding tours because the horses are usually of inferior quality. There is nothing that spoils a horse more quickly than having a succession of inept or careless riders. And the operators of such "trail rides" must buy horses that are very safe (read plugs) to minimize the chances of anyone getting injured. Good riders would rather stay home.

But I could see right away that Dallas Love's horses were different. She and her brother Mordecai, a competitive dressage rider, schooled all the horses themselves. Many were bred on her farm near the little village of Bubion—one of southern Spain's famed white villages that cling to the precipitous mountainsides of the region.

When I called to book a trip, Dallas asked a lot of questions to try and determine how experienced Basil and I were. I told her frankly that Basil had only been riding for a year but that he was taking dressage lessons and was walking, trotting, and cantering competently. I told her that he was young and strong. After some hesitation, she agreed to accept him. I did not mention his heart condition. Indeed, in typical fashion, I did not for one minute consider the risks such a trip might pose for someone with advanced coronary disease. Horseback riding through the Sierra Nevada; it sounded so romantic, so adventurous. And Basil, who, as we have already established, can be something of a nervous Nellie, wasn't afraid. But then, how could he know the things that could go wrong? He'd only ridden in very controlled conditions in an indoor arena under the supervision of a qualified instructor. Basil had no real conception of how unpredictable horses can be out in the open.

Beautiful and noble as they are, they are also inherently flighty and nervous. Bolting and leaping out of the way at the slightest unexpected sound or movement is an instinctive survival mechanism for horses, whose only chance of survival is to outrun predators. Basil had fallen off when Becky shied at a pigeon, but landing on the soft turf of the indoor riding ring was nothing like hitting the rocky side of a mountain at a full gallop.

Of course, anyone going on a trip like this one faces the risk of falling off. What I did not consider was the fact that Basil was taking powerful drugs to thin his blood; a bad fall

for him could mean serious internal bleeding. Even this would not be life threatening in normal circumstances, but when I booked our trip, I had no conception of how far we would be from the kind of medical attention he might need in an emergency.

No, in the cavalier spirit of a chronic optimist, I imagined leisurely canters through sunny Spanish meadows and brisk trots along tree-lined lanes on well-trained, sensible, sturdy steeds. The reality was to prove vastly different. Basil, of course, didn't know what to expect. As the date of our departure approached, I started to get a little nervous; our main concern was whether he was a good enough rider to keep up with the group. But I reasoned that, if any of it seemed too much for him, we could always sit out for a day and do some other kind of sightseeing.

We were met at the airport in Malaga, a resort city on Spain's Mediterranean coast, by a bus that took us and six other members of our group on a three-hour drive away from the warm, sunny seaside up, up into the rugged mountains called Las Alpujarras. As the narrow road twisted and coiled its way toward our destination, Bubion, a village so remote that I had been unable to find it in my National Geographic atlas before leaving home, the air grew colder and thinner and the fog and drizzle thickened. According to the itinerary, we were to spend the night in Bubion and ride each day for six or seven hours to a different village before returning on the last day to our starting point. The tour operators would move our luggage from hotel to hotel. We would have dinner and breakfast in restaurants but lunches would be picnics on the trail prepared by Dallas and her sister Eve.

At dinner the first night, we met Dallas, or, I should say, she met us. A tall and muscular blonde whose weathered face and faded blue eyes made her age impossible to guess, she spent that first meal taking measure of each of us and men-

tally matching us with the members of her four-legged family happily chomping their hay a few miles up the road at her stable.

In another fit of optimism, I wore a dress and sandals to that first dinner even though moody clouds jostled the terraced hillsides outside the window of our tiny hotel room and a chilly wind blew through the cobblestoned, whitewashed lanes of Bubion. I soon abandoned any attempts at holiday glamour and struggled for the rest of the week to keep the too few warm clothes I had brought with me clean and dry. Sunny Spain turned out not to be as advertised. And I can assure you that the line in the song about the rain staying mainly on the plain is a myth.

The first morning of our ride, however, was brilliant and sunny, if a little on the cool side. We arrived at the stable at 9:00 A.M. sharp, and Dallas led a massive gray gelding out of the low whitewashed stable into the yard and looped his lead shank through an iron ring on the stucco wall. Behind her, beyond the tiled barn roof, the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada loomed against a clear, blue sky.

"This is Longo," she said as the horse rubbed his long face against her arm. "Longo," she reached up and scratched him behind the ears, "meet Basil."

Basil, decked out in his brand-new riding breeches and his oiled canvas hat, put a wary hand on the muscular shoulder of the creature that would be his traveling partner for the next seven days. Longo's black muzzle snaked around to inspect the new client. Love, who had been pairing horses and riders for the past seventeen years, watched man and horse size one another up. "Longo," she told Basil in her gruff English accent, "used to be my lead horse. He's good and sensible. But," she narrowed her eyes, "he's used to being in front. You'll find he wants to go."

Basil gave me a look that was simultaneously joyful and filled with apprehension. He and Longo looked like a good match, both of them tall and burly and handsome. My horse, another gray, was a five-year-old, sweet-tempered gelding called Hardy. That morning, Dallas's assistant, Maria, tacked the horses up for us, but from now on we were on our own.

The group that set out that morning on the twenty-four-kilometer journey to Trevelez, the highest village in Spain (altitude 3,000 meters above sea level), was made up of ten of us—five Americans, one Brit, two Danes, and two Canadians (Basil and me). We started out slowly, climbing at a dignified walk, as we got to know our horses, through chestnut groves and flower-spangled meadows along the ancient Moorish bridle paths—remnants of the mule routes known as the Camino Real that crisscross Spain. The perilously steep hillsides have been farmed for as long as two thousand years, and the intricate irrigation systems put in place by Berber refugees in the twelfth century continue to nourish the rich soils of the deep, lush valleys of the region.

About an hour after leaving, Dallas rode back to where Basil and I were bringing up the rear. She pulled her horse, Marcellus, up beside me and asked me if I would be willing to change horses with Neil, a computer consultant from California, who was riding a chestnut gelding called Camino. Puzzled, I agreed, as Dallas explained as discreetly as she could that Neil was not as experienced as he had presented himself. This was only the second time that Camino, the gelding Neil was riding, had been on an organized ride. Dallas had bred and schooled him herself, and you could see by the concern in her eyes that he was like a son to her. She had wanted someone experienced, preferably a man, to ride him, because not only was Camino nervous and unused to being out with a group, he was also very strong.

We all pulled up so that Neil and I could make the switch, and as soon as I mounted Camino, I could tell that he was a very different proposition from the mannerly and somewhat sedate Hardy. I was going to have my hands full. I felt a fist of concern pressing up under my rib cage, not just because this ride was going to challenge me in ways I had not anticipated, but also because I wouldn't be able to attend to Basil if he should get into trouble.

For now, though, everything was going splendidly. Longo kept up a calm and steady pace, and Camino, though a little jumpy, looking at everything, was quiet and manageable. As we climbed higher into the clouds, the sun disappeared and a fine mist painted the Alpine forests an eerie silver and rose. Low-growing shrubs flowered yellow and blue. Flocks of goats and sheep, heralded by the hollow clanging of brass bells, slithered like bleating rivers out of our way. After stopping for lunch in the village of Portugo, we had a brisk trot for about two miles, and, as promised, Longo surged to the front of the group, passing even the two young Danish women who were clearly eager to speed things up. Basil looked confident and in control.

At Trevelez, after leading our horses down a steep, narrow path, we made our way along twisty cobblestoned streets. The villagers, hearing the clip-clop of iron on stone, emerged from behind curtained doorways to watch the parade of gray horses. Dallas, in her trademark canvas hat, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, led the way through town. The veteran horsewoman is famous in the region, both for her intimate knowledge of the mountains and their ways and for the beauty of her horses. We arrived at a low-ceilinged stone stable; and after untacking and feeding the animals, we walked (stiffly after seven hours in the saddle) back through the narrow streets to our modest hotel. At din-

ner, Basil was flushed with exhilaration and relief that he had been able to keep up after all.

Day two dawned cold and gray. Our first challenge was a steep, rocky path up the side of the mountain. Because it had started to rain and the rocks were slippery, we dismounted and led the horses single file up the two-foot-wide trail. On the right was a sheer drop hundreds of feet down to a deep river gorge.

"Do not stop. Do not let your horses graze. Do not look down," Dallas exhorted us before leading the way up the narrow trail. Basil was right behind her. I was sixth in line. Judy, a bureaucrat from Washington, D.C., rode ahead of me. She may have been an experienced rider, but she was finding the climb on foot difficult. She stopped to catch her breath and those of us behind her waited an agonizing two or three minutes, steadying our horses on the treacherous path to prevent them from plunging to the rocks below. After what seemed like an eternity, Judy moved on and miraculously, or so it seemed, we all made it.

For the rest of the morning, we climbed higher and higher into the cold clouds through meadows of lavender and thyme and wild roses. We stopped for a hurried lunch, tying the horses to trees while we ate a picnic of ham and cheese, sliced tomatoes, white asparagus, and crusty bread washed down with red wine diluted with water. After lunch, the drizzle turned into a heavy, sheeting downpour and a thick fog rolled in. The views from high up in the mountains at 1,500 feet were said to be spectacular. On a clear day, the brochures promised, you can look out across the Mediterranean Sea to Morocco. Meanwhile, we could barely make out the rear end

of the horse in front of us. We rode three more hours through the fog and driving rain until we reached the village of Berchules.

Never in my life had I been as wet and cold and miserable. Later, after putting the horses away and taking a long, hot bath in our hotel, Basil and I met Dallas sitting downstairs at the bar. She had just finished her second brandy. As we joined her, she took a long pull on her cigarette and ordered a third. The ashtray on the bar was filled with butts. Her long blonde hair was pulled back off her mud-streaked forehead into a sleek ponytail. Her cotton shirt, still wet, clung to her muscular back and arms. Her face was lined with strain. It had not been a good day.

The others trickled down to the bar, looking better now that they had washed and changed. The atmosphere was subdued; we were all very tired, very stiff. We compared blisters and bruises. Ed and Judy announced they would take the next day off; more rain was forecast. The Danes grumbled because the pace was too slow. They wanted more gallops. They were younger than the rest of us and had come on this trip looking for adventure, not spectacular scenery. Only Basil seemed happy. Indeed, he was positively giddy, and after dinner, as we huddled by the fireplace in the lounge, hoping against hope that the low blaze would dry our boots before morning, his exuberance warmed the room.

At least we were well fed. The food was very good—peasant fare: stews made from locally raised pork and chicken, sweet air-cured ham, grilled fresh trout, hearty bean and lentil soups, thick potato omelets. Desserts of melon and pears or fresh cheese with walnuts and honey.

The next day was misty and cool, still no sun in sunny Spain, but other than a couple of brief showers early in the day, the rain held off. Our first challenge of the morning

involved crossing a deep and swift-moving river strewn with large boulders. Dallas gathered us together:

"Stay as close as you can to the bridge," she called out, raising her voice in order to be heard over the roar of the river. There was a stone footbridge near where we were crossing. "Follow close behind me. Go exactly where I go. If you stray downstream into the deep water, the current is very strong. Your horse could lose his footing and drown."

Dallas turned and urged Marcellus into the torrent. Basil was right behind her, but instead of wading into the stream, Longo stopped and put his head down to sample some of the sweet river grass. Basil pulled and kicked, Dallas turned in midstream and called out to them. Longo continued to eat. When Basil finally persuaded him to follow, the horse headed downstream in the chest-deep water. He stumbled, Basil clung to his neck, they went down, then Longo regained his footing and scrambled up the opposite bank. The rest of us, chastened, crossed without incident. But I could see there is more than one way to lose a husband.

After lunch, the Danes got their wish as we rode along a wide, dry riverbed edged with thickets of olive and willow. They blasted off at a flat-out breakneck gallop, while the rest of us bunched up behind Dallas for an infinitely saner, but still brisk, canter. Longo, however, preferred not to be left behind and, despite Basil's efforts to keep him back, charged after the Danes, who by now were way out in front. Worried about Basil, I broke rank and took off after him. Camino was magnificent. I managed to stay in control, but it was like trying to hold back a train. Every few strides, he tossed his powerful head and surged under me. The muscles in my arms burned, but somehow I was able to hold him. We rounded a bend and there was Basil still aboard Longo, who was standing still in the middle of the track waiting for us. Longo

whinnied. Basil was laughing out loud; we took a moment to catch our breath and headed off again at a steady gallop side-by-side for another mile or so until we caught up with the two young women looking ruddy and breathless with exhilaration.

To this day, I don't know who was actually in charge, Basil or Longo. My husband assures me that he knew what he was doing, but my instinct is that Longo was exercising his right as honorary lead horse and that if Basil had tried to impose his will he would have lost. Fortunately, the horse was a kind and well-mannered old hand. Basil's confidence as an equestrian was soaring; so was mine. These rides were hard going, and each day was a test of our endurance and our nerve. Every morning, I was filled with dread as we set out on God knows what terrifying adventure. Each evening, after we bedded and fed our horses and dragged our weary bones to our hotel, I gave a quiet thanks that we were still in one piece.

Basil seemed oblivious to what I saw as constant danger. He was relaxed and fearless, uncharacteristically so, for the entire trek. Dallas and I agreed, when I finally told her on the second to last day that Basil had had quadruple bypass surgery just eighteen months earlier, that inexperience is bliss. She knew only too well how easily something could go wrong: a horse shying into the path of a bus, a hind leg slipping over a cliff, a pigeon darting from the bushes. That was her job, riding shotgun on ten tourists with varying degrees of skill, week after week after week. No wonder she took solace in cigarettes and a bottle of brandy at the end of the day.

The last two days were blessedly mild and sunny at last. By now we were all, horses and riders, seasoned and relaxed, and the final rides were glorious and uneventful. Dallas said she was glad I hadn't told her sooner about Basil's heart con-

dition; it would have only increased her stress. And if I had known how challenging the trip was, I'm not sure I would have suggested it in the first place. We were to find out only after we arrived back in Canada the extent of the risk we had taken.

Mediterranean Fish Tagine

The so-called Mediterranean diet is now being touted as heart healthy. And, yes, with its reliance on fish, olive oil, grains, and chickpeas, it sounds ideal. We found, however, that the reality is that the people of southern Spain are committed meat eaters. Their delicious cured ham is everywhere, huge joints of it hanging in rows from the beams of every tavern. The local pork is said to be raised on chestnuts and is dark and delicious. Because we were on holiday and starving after our long days in the saddle, Basil and I dispensed with our usual gustatory caution. But whenever we could, we ate the excellent local trout and fresh fish from the sea. This fish stew from Morocco is fragrant and delicious.

Marinade

2 garlic cloves
1 teaspoon coarse salt
2 teaspoons ground cumin
Juice of 1 lemon
½ tablespoon good-quality red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon paprika
½ cup fresh cilantro, roughly chopped
1 tablespoon olive oil

Combine ingredients in a food processor or mortar and pestle into a smooth paste. Rub into the fish fillets and refrigerate for 20 minutes to 2 hours.

4 fillets of white fish (hake, halibut, snapper)
20 small new potatoes
3 tablespoons olive oil
4 garlic cloves
15 cherry tomatoes
4 green peppers, grilled, peeled, and cut into strips
12 black olives
¼ cup water
Salt and pepper

Boil the potatoes for 10 to 15 minutes until tender. Drain and cut in half. Heat 2 tablespoons of oil in a medium saucepan and sauté the garlic. Add the tomatoes and toss for 2 minutes. Stir in the green peppers and the remaining marinade.

In a large, heavy-bottomed skillet, spread the potatoes evenly over the bottom. Scatter ¾ of the pepper/tomato mixture over the potatoes. Top with the fish. Sprinkle with olives and the remaining peppers. Add the water, drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil.

Cover, bring to a boil, and steam over medium to high heat for 10 to 15 minutes or until the fish flakes easily. Serves 4.

Chickpeas with Spinach

Chickpeas, also known as garbanzo beans, were introduced to Spain by the Moors. They are widely grown on the terraced mountain farms in the southern province of Andalusia. If you're a purist, by all means soak and cook dried chickpeas yourself, but unlike other beans these are almost as good straight from the can. High in protein and fiber, we always have a few cans on hand. This recipe is excellent as a side dish with fish, and leftovers make a very tasty lunch the

next day. (If you can't find smoked paprika, ordinary sweet paprika is fine.)

3 tablespoons olive oil
3 leeks, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon grated lemon zest
3 cloves garlic, sliced
2 14½-ounce cans chickpeas, drained and rinsed
¾ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon smoked paprika
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 cup slow-roasted cherry tomatoes*
1 bunch of spinach, washed

Heat the oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the leeks and lemon zest and sauté for about 8 minutes or until the leeks are golden and a little crisp. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute. Add the chickpeas, cumin, paprika, and red pepper flakes and cook for 5 minutes or until heated through.

Add the roasted tomatoes and the spinach. Cover and steam until the spinach is wilted. Serves 4.

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* Toss 2 cups of cherry tomatoes and 2 sliced garlic cloves with a tablespoon of olive oil and 1/2 teaspoon coarse salt. Roast in a 325°F for 1 hour. Store refrigerated for 3 or 4 days.

24

A Nose for Trouble

Basil's dressage lessons seemed pretty tame after our adventures in Spain, and he was eager to show Becky what a seasoned equestrian he had become. We both decided we had had enough of trotting around an indoor arena and that it was time to take our skills into the great outdoors. I had arranged with Rob at the equestrian center to lease a sturdy gray gelding named Sebastian for a couple of months. He was lively and fairly sensible for a five-year-old; in fact, he would have been a better mount for Basil that first day out. But you know what they say about hindsight.

Although it had been wet and cool all spring, the day we set out on our first outdoor ride together was a perfect day in June. Basil was in high spirits as he groomed and tacked Becky. I was less sanguine.

"Are you sure you don't want me to ride her first?" I asked.

"She's my horse, Ces. I have to do this sometime."

"Okay. But remember, she's not used to this. It's not the same out there as it is in the ring."

"Ces, I'll be fine."

We mounted up and headed past the barn through a field toward the back of Rob's property, where we planned to let our-

selves through a gate and onto a blind side road that would take us on a short hack around the block and back to the barn. I suggested we ride around the field a couple of times just to make sure everybody was getting along. Sebastian was calm. Becky was walking quietly, but she was looking at everything, her head high, her little ears pointed forward, her nostrils flared.

She's a good girl, Becky, but she's a thoroughbred, highly strung and born to run. I had ridden her on a couple of hacks the previous fall with my friend Jeanette and her daughter Carly, and Becky had been a challenge, snorting and sidestepping at every blade of long grass that brushed her legs, at every bird that crossed our path. We had even ventured a short gallop across a field on Jeanette's farm, and although Becky was easy to hold, like driving a very responsive sports car, there was no ignoring the speed and power gathered under me, 1,200 pounds of boiling energy contained by a couple of lengths of leather and a nickel-plated bit. It was totally awesome; the blood of Northern Dancer ran in this girl's veins, and I could feel that if I had let her have her head, she would have been gone with the wind.

All of which made for a very exhilarating ride but not very relaxing. After our gallops, Becky was so worked up that she jogged sideways all the way home. By the time we got back to the barn, her coat was white with lather, and I was exhausted. Since then, I had been trying to make Basil understand that the calm and collected mare he had his lessons on every week in the indoor ring turned into fiery virago in the great outdoors. If Longo was like a strong and steady freight train, Becky was like a kite in a windstorm.

But how do you get that across? It's like trying to describe sex to a tree. So, in retrospect, I should never have let him take Becky out that day. But he was so eager and I thought that if he ran into trouble we could always switch horses.

Partway across the field, everything was going well. Becky was alert but contained. I suggested we break into a trot, keeping close to the fence. We trotted easily; Becky snorted once or twice and tossed her head, but she didn't try anything. Basil looked ecstatic; here he was, the wind in his face, riding his horse across an open meadow. A group of three horses in the field next to the one we were riding in stopped grazing to watch us, clustered quietly, tails swishing. As we trotted around the corner and down the length of the field, they, too, broke into a trot, curious apparently about what their stablemates were up to. I was slightly ahead of Becky and Basil so I didn't see what happened. But I heard Basil cry out loudly. I looked over my shoulder and was relieved to see that he hadn't fallen off. But he was swearing loudly, and Becky had broken into a choppy canter when she saw the other horses. Basil was doing his best to hold her. I pulled Sebastian up beside her and grabbed one of her reins.

I talked to her as calmly as I could and pulled her to a stop.

"Basil, what's wrong?" He was slumped over in the saddle, one hand covering his nose.

"Christ," he said. "She really got me, right in the face."

It could have been worse, or so I thought at the time. Becky had tossed her head as she broke into a canter and hit Basil squarely in the nose. It was bleeding slightly and it hurt like hell, so he dismounted and we walked back to the barn. So much for our ride; we hadn't made it more than a few hundred yards. After all our adventures in Spain, the idea that our bold plans in our own backyard would come to this smarted almost as much as Basil's nose, which though it didn't seem to be broken continued to bleed slightly off and on throughout the day.

We drove back to Toronto that evening and the next morning went to work as usual. That's when the real adven-

ture began. He called me about 11:00 to say that he was coming home.

"My nose started bleeding about an hour ago, and I can't make it stop," he said.

"Maybe you should call Dr. Crawford and go straight there."

She saw Basil right away and said he would have to have the inside of his nose cauterized to stop the bleeding, which at this point was a steady but not alarming trickle. Dr. Crawford sent him immediately to an ear, nose, and throat specialist in the east end of the city, who quickly cauterized the damaged blood vessels and told him to go home and keep very quiet for a couple days until his nose healed.

After that, things went from bad to worse. As he was driving home, the bleeding, which had stopped after the cauterization, began again, only this time it was a lot more than a trickle. Basil had an old T-shirt in the backseat. He bunched it up and held it to his nose and somehow managed to drive home across town through rush-hour traffic, shifting gears and steering with one hand while trying to staunch his freely flowing nosebleed with the other.

The man who walked in the front door looked as though he'd been in a train wreck. I cleaned him up as well as I could and sat him down with a basin, a pile of towels, and some wet cloths. His nose was bleeding heavily, but we expected that it would subside once he calmed down, after all, he had just had it cauterized and that was supposed to fix things, right? A half hour went by and then an hour and the bleeding still hadn't stopped. He wasn't exactly hemorrhaging, but the flow was steady and thick with big mucouslike clots. I was getting alarmed, but I tried not to let Basil see my concern. I reasoned that his blood pressure must be elevated and that was causing the bleeding. Basil, by this time, was on the verge of panic, so I gave him an Atavan and said that I was

going to take the dog around the block and when I got back, I would call the doctor.

You'd think I would be able to see an emergency staring me in the face, but no, my inner optimist was at it again. As I dragged Harpo down the sidewalk and wondered what to do next, I ran into my neighbor Dr. Sue (the same Dr. Sue who had given Basil Dean Ornish's book), who was out playing street hockey with her kids. I interrupted the game to ask her what I should do and I saw the flutter of alarm that crossed her features.

"Take him to emergency," she said, "and I'd do it sooner rather than later." I thanked her and turned to hurry back to the house.

"And Cecily?" Sue called after me. "Go to Western General. The wait there will probably be shorter."

Now I was really scared. I went home, grabbed the darkest colored towel I could find, and ushered Basil out to the car with it pressed to his face. It was close to 8:00 P.M. and the crazy hours were just getting under way at the General. The emergency room was packed. I found Basil a chair and went to the front to take a number. Forty-six.

Forty-six people ahead of us. After sitting for ten minutes, I calculated that, at the rate they were seeing patients, we'd still be there the next morning. Basil's face was buried in a dark purple towel that no one around us could see was becoming saturated with his blood. This nosebleed was now more than four hours old. He wasn't saying a word, but we both knew that there was no way he could sit there much longer. Despite the full waiting room, no one seemed to be in obvious distress. I couldn't see any blood or broken bones or overt pain. Still I hesitated; my Canadian politeness is deeply ingrained. "Wait your turn," "Don't be pushy," the strictures of a lifetime die hard even when they're completely inappropriate.

Finally, I knew I had to act. I marched through the knot of people sitting quietly, some of them dozing or moaning softly, past a drunken woman arguing with a police officer and a feverish looking child curled in his mother's lap, to where a nurse was sitting at a desk in a small office behind a sliding glass window. I knocked on the window, and as I waited for her to respond, I was heartened to see a mimeographed sheet taped to the glass saying that the emergency ward operated on a triage basis.

Triage was developed as a way of allocating treatment to victims of war or other disasters according to a set of priorities that maximizes the survival rate. I've never been clear about how it works or who decides who goes first, and I didn't know if Basil's life was in danger or not, but the triage sign gave me permission to jump the queue. I knocked on the glass again and the nurse slid the window open.

"My husband has a bad nosebleed," I said as clearly and calmly as I could. "He recently had quadruple bypass surgery and he's taking blood thinners." That was enough.

"Bring him right through," she said, indicating a door to the left. We were ushered into a curtained cubicle with a cot, and before long a doctor arrived to examine Basil. He listened to our story and said he would have to "pack" Basil's nose to stop the bleeding. He said that the cauterization was responsible for the hemorrhage; by stopping the bleeding in one spot, the damaged blood vessels around it had backed up and burst, and because Basil was taking a blood thinner called Plavix plus low-dose aspirin to reduce clotting, there was nothing to stop the deluge.

Packing Basil's nose involved inserting a large tampon-like missile into his left nostril, spraying it with water so that it would expand, and leaving it there for forty-eight hours, after which he would have to return to the ear, nose, and throat specialist to have it removed. The procedure, Basil

maintains, was almost as bad as his surgery. At least he was unconscious when they operated. For two days, he said he felt as though he was walking around with a dildo up his nose. The pressure gave him a splitting headache and made sleep impossible.

He could hardly wait to have it taken out, except that the emergency room doctor had warned him that if the pack didn't stop the bleeding they'd have to "go in the back door," meaning they'd pack his nasal cavity from inside the back of his throat. And if Basil thought he was uncomfortable now, well, the doctor said with an audible grimace, "Let's just hope this works."

Poor Basil. He'd returned from Spain feeling like a conquering hero, as though he'd finally turned a corner and he could begin to live free of fear. And now, three days later, he was flat on his back again. The pack was removed successfully, no bleeding except for a tiny, sporadic, troublesome trickle that dried up in a day or so.

The doctor ordered him to do "absolutely nothing" for at least three days. The weekend had rolled around again, so we headed to Singhampton, where I worked like a slave in the garden trying to get ahead of the weeds that had overtaken my herbs and perennials while we'd been away, and Basil followed the doctor's orders.

He was surprisingly good at this and raised not a single complaint at having to spend the entire weekend on the living room sofa with a book. Another unanticipated hurdle overcome. It was the first time in his life he'd ever had a nosebleed, I suppose because his blood, the blood of a man with coronary artery disease, has always been too sticky. Indeed, he never used to bruise the way most people do. Until now. Now his arms and legs are usually black and blue. When we were in Spain, the backs of his thighs turned into one massive

bruise from spending so much time in the saddle. We didn't think anything of it at the time. But now my blood runs cold when I realize how easily Basil could have banged his nose while we were riding in the mountains hundreds of miles from any hospitals. What would we have done then?

Yes, it was the trip of a lifetime. But in retrospect, I think we were being cavalier with Basil's safety. For his fiftieth, I'm planning to take him to Paris. I mean, what's a little cheese after what he's been through?

White Beans with Herbs and Mustard

Cheese and pastries are not the only foods the French revere. They have transformed the lowly white bean into something very special. You can make this with navy or cannellini beans or, if you're lucky enough to find them, delicately green-tinted flageolets. Use only the finest ingredients, extra-virgin olive oil, fine sea salt, good quality mustard, and homemade chicken stock.

Because beans are full of fiber and protein, we regularly make this simple, elegant side dish instead of white rice or potatoes. It goes beautifully with fish or chicken and is particularly fine on the rare occasion we throw caution to the wind and decide to roast a leg of lamb.

10 cloves of garlic, peeled and halved
1½ tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 pound small white beans, soaked overnight
2 cups chicken stock
1 bay leaf
¼ cup sage leaves
Sea salt
2 tablespoons coarse-grained Dijon mustard

Sauté the garlic in the olive oil in a large, heavy-bottomed pan until it is fragrant but not brown, about 2 minutes. Add the soaked beans and cook, stirring, for 1 minute.

Add just enough stock to cover the beans. Add the bay leaf, sage, and salt. Cover and simmer until the beans are tender, about 1 hour. Add more stock or water if necessary.

Remove and discard the bay leaf and sage. Add the mustard and stir well. Taste for seasoning and serve hot with extra olive oil on the side to drizzle over the beans. Serves 4.

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All the Days of Our Lives

The main street of the usually sleepy little town of Creemore on this Saturday afternoon in mid-September was throbbing with life. Crowds of well-heeled men and women spilled in and out of the cafes and galleries dotted along the tree-lined streets. It was a perfect day to kick off the annual Purple Hills Studio Tour, an event that married the natural beauty of a drive through the russet and gold countryside with the chance to take in the man-made creations of the area's many artists and artisans.

Armed with our little maps, we were strolling along Mill Street when we heard a voice calling Basil's name in an accent rich with European overtones. We turned and saw a handsome man who looked to be about sixty running along the sidewalk, weaving through the crowds of gallery-goers, waving his arms. "Basil, Basil. It's you. I knew it was you," the man said as he caught up with us. Coming along behind him was a slim woman who was clearly his wife.

I had never seen them before but Basil called back immediately. "Isaac," he said. "Isaac."

Whereupon Isaac threw his arms around Basil and drew him into a vigorous hug. "I thought I'd lost you," he cried.

His voice was full of emotion. "I thought something had happened to you. Where have you been?"

The man called Isaac looked as though he might weep for joy. He turned to his wife: "Rachel," he said, "it's Basil."

Rachel nodded and smiled with sphinxlike serenity. Isaac turned back to Basil. "We were sitting there finishing our lunch," he waved in the direction of a coffee shop half a block away. "I saw the top of your gray head going by." He grabbed one of Basil's hands in both his own. His eyes burned and his voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I knew it was you. You're alive. Alive."

Basil had told me about Isaac, the friend he had made during his nine months in cardiac rehab. During their timed and monitored power walks around the indoor track, the two men had begun trading small talk. Isaac asked Basil if his leg, the one with the thin red line from ankle to groin where they'd removed the length of vein to fashion into grafts, ever swelled. Basil said yes, it did, and his foot often felt numb.

By April, as winter softened into spring, they had graduated to the outdoor track. One mild day, after their workout, as the two men strolled together filling their lungs with air that smelled of wet earth and the faint perfume of trees in bud, Basil began telling Isaac about the mindfulness program he was enrolled in, how he was meditating every day and how helpful he found the practice in helping him deal with his fears and his sadness.

The conversation was a revelation, Isaac told us over coffee back at the same Creemore restaurant he had rushed out of a few moments earlier, forgetting to pay for his lunch.

"Basil was the first person since my heart surgery who talked to me about how he was feeling," Isaac said, "not physically, but here," he tapped the side of his head with his knuckles. He was not a man accustomed to talking about such matters. Twenty years older than Basil, he had been

born in Israel and emigrated to Canada thirty years ago after living for a decade in Johannesburg. Self-reliant and passionate, Isaac, with Rachel, had raised three sons and started a successful travel business. Sitting across the table from us with the autumn sun streaking the red-and-white-checked tablecloth, Isaac seemed as intense and exuberant as Basil is quiet and reserved. He too did not look like a candidate for open-heart surgery. Slim and tanned, Isaac seemed a decade younger than his sixty-odd years.

Late in the fall of 2002, he had gone to his doctor complaining of indigestion. At first, Isaac refused to accept the diagnosis of severe coronary artery disease. How could he, who took pride in the fact that he had never been sick a day in his life, be on the verge of having a fatal heart attack? Instead of admitting himself to the hospital immediately, as his doctor ordered, Isaac went back to the office. Stubborn and self-reliant, he persisted in denying his condition for a week, then two, until Rachel, terrified he was going to drop dead any moment, threatened to leave unless he faced the truth.

A week later, in early December, just one month after Basil had his operation, Isaac underwent triple bypass surgery. And now, just like Basil and me, he and his wife were coping with the enormous change that this event had wrought in their lives. Though neither man would have believed it in those first dark days, when climbing a flight of stairs required a superhuman effort, the physical devastation caused by the surgery turned out to be a fleeting thing. The body healed. The mind would never be the same. I could tell by the way he told us his story that afternoon that Isaac was riveted by his experience, that it would forever be the main event in his life.

Like Basil, in the months following the operation as he grew stronger, Isaac began to take stock. And like Basil, the

thing he was most certain of was very simple indeed: having confronted the alternative, he was glad to be alive, and he wanted to stay that way. At first, he was frightened enough that he felt he would do anything to ensure his survival, but as the scars on his chest healed, his determination to become a completely new person faded a little. I asked him what he was doing differently. Was he working less, running marathons, restricting his diet to nuts and berries?

"No," said Isaac, "I still work six days a week, but I never used to exercise. Now I walk," he said as he poured a dollop of cream into his second cup of coffee. Every morning, he told me, he and his rambunctious dog hit the pavement for a brisk half-hour to forty-five-minute walk.

It seemed to be enough; Isaac glowed with energy and vigor. I'm not a heart specialist, but I do believe that there are two things that can have transformative power in an individual's life. One of them, of course, is love. The other, silly as it sounds, is walking. Not only is it good exercise, walking forces you to slow down, to experience the world in real time, something that is almost prehistoric in an era where speed and efficiency rule. When Basil and I walk, together or by ourselves, we turn off our cell phones and leave our Walkmans at home. Walking is a chance to be alone with yourself, to meditate or to imagine. I do some of my best thinking on the hour's walk to work in the morning.

Not only that, but recent studies have shown that thirty minutes of moderate exercise a day is as effective in treating mild depression as taking an antidepressant. As helpful as the Effexor has been, we both hope that in the not too distant future it will be one less drug Basil has to take. Walking, it seems to me, is the perfect medicine, so simple, so Zen.

Rachel, sitting beside Isaac, was a foil to his garrulousness. She radiated a gracious serenity, marbled with a protectiveness that she wore plainly but lightly. What was it like

for her? This was the first time I had met another survivor's spouse. While Basil and Isaac had their army of cardiologists and rehab staff (and in Basil's case a psychiatrist), we, the wives, were muddling along without a lot of guidance. Bringing Basil home from the hospital had reminded me of how I had felt as a new mother, mystified and daunted by the responsibility of caring for someone so fragile. The only difference was that then I had been able to fall back on the advice and experience of friends and family and the countless books written on the subject of parenthood. The aftermath of Basil's heart disease was uncharted territory, an expanse of frightening proportions that I faced unaided. I had had no idea what to expect.

I could see that Isaac was probably a handful, that his gregariousness belied a stubborn streak and a quick temper, just as underneath Basil's gentleness ran a simmering current of hostility and nervousness, and that it was these things that could kill him someday.

It seems that our job, mine and Rachel's, is to soothe the savage beast. I could see in the way she watched and listened to her husband, as the force of his personality filled the small cafe, that her vigilance was instinctive and constant. Occasionally, she touched his arm quietly, unobtrusively, a signal that he was winding up, and as she did, you could see Isaac check himself, soften, and move into a lower gear.

I realized as I watched Rachel that I too am a barometer for Basil's moods, picking up his tensions and anxieties and registering them instinctively on my own internal gauge. But whereas in the past my agitation would rise along with his, now, instinctively, instead of reacting, I respond in inverse proportion to his moods. My mercury goes down as his rises. I try to blanket the flames rather than fan them. This is an old story in the long history of the relations between men and women: he reacts, she responds. I'm sorry to say that femi-

nism has not freed us from having to do most of the emotional work.

But what is also true is that men such as Basil and Isaac have reached a place that not many men of their generation can lay claim to: a self-awareness that allows them to respond in kind to the unspoken ministrations of an emotionally well-tuned spouse. This is marriage. We are like a team of horses, inextricably connected by an invisible harness, and if we don't work together emotionally, pulling a little harder when we have to, holding back from time to time, compensating for one another's weaknesses, leaning on our respective strengths, we're not going to make it back to the barn together.

It's hard work, and we don't always get it right, but we are always conscious of the necessity of trying. Basil's heart disease has taught both of us many things, the most important of which is the imperative of honesty. We must confront our feelings. We cannot bottle up our resentments or ignore our fears; the time to deal with each issue is right now, every day. And so our life together is filled with ongoing self-examination and continual fine-tuning. It has become our great adventure and a challenge at least as great as either of us has faced in professional or physical terms.

We parted company with Rachel and Isaac that afternoon amid a flurry of promises to stay in touch, to get together soon, a lunch or a dinner, another day in the country. But like so many people who come into our lives briefly and accidentally, I didn't really expect we would see them again.

Which is why I was surprised when Basil announced about a month later that Rachel had called him and invited us to drop in to their house in the city for tea one Sunday in early December. When the day arrived, Basil and I were in Singhampton; it was a brisk, wintry day, and we were con-

sidering spending the night there and heading back to Toronto early in the morning. Just as we were about to call Rachel and ask if we could postpone our "tea" to the following week, the telephone rang.

"I'm just calling to make sure you're coming," she said.

"Well, actually . . ." Basil began.

"No. You must come. I have everything ready." Her tone had a peremptory ring that put all thought of reneging out of our minds. I'm ashamed to say that we packed up and headed back to the city with great reluctance. We found their street, not far from our own neighborhood, with no difficulty. Their house, like ours, is a modest older home in a quiet area. Rachel answered the door and we could see right away that we had miscalculated. She was dressed very elegantly in olive green trousers and a matching sweater. Her hair and makeup were flawless. Isaac wore trousers and a navy blue linen shirt. Basil and I were still decked out in our country uniform of jeans and polar fleece and Blundstone boots; we had forgotten to take any decent clothes away with us for the weekend. I had combed my hair and applied a hasty smear of lipstick in the car, but I knew we looked like hayseeds who had crashed the ball.

We looked past Rachel to see other guests milling around the fireplace in the small living room. A car pulled up on the street and a couple got out and came up the walk behind us. What we had assumed was a casual invitation to drop by for tea I could see now was a full-blown party. The dining room table was set with formal individual places, as though for dinner, though it was only 4:00 P.M. Platters of canapés were arranged in the middle, and at every place there was a luncheon plate, cutlery, and a cup and saucer.

Basil and I sat down side by side on a stiff love seat across from six other guests who treated us with friendly curiosity,

asking many questions about what we did for a living and our house in the country. Everyone was obviously trying very hard to make us feel at ease. They all seemed to be old friends. Like Rachel and Isaac, they spoke elegant English laden with memories of Tel Aviv. Occasionally, someone would lapse briefly into Yiddish, especially one older man, whose English was clearly a struggle. I wondered why on earth we had been invited to this gathering. Rachel and Isaac barely knew us, and yet she had been so insistent that we attend, and now they were treating us as though we were the guests of honor.

Soon after everyone had arrived, Rachel urged us to take a seat around the dining room table. We were offered tea or coffee and began helping ourselves to the small savories laid out before us: little pastry shells, some filled with egg salad, others with cream cheese and caviar. There were triangular toast points spread with liverwurst and small bowls of olives and pickles. The conversation was lively, verging on intense. Isaac was very animated, sitting at the head of the table clearly relishing his role as host. He talked about a play he had just seen about a woman who travels to the Middle East and who returns home with her preconceived notions about the Arab-Israeli conflict shredded with uncertainty. Isaac had not liked the play's message. One of his guests, an older woman married to the man who was struggling with his English, thought the play was honest in its insistence that God doesn't take sides.

This was dangerous territory. Basil and I had been bred in our WASPy bones to avoid such hot topics in social situations, and we knew that for Jews emotions ran very high when it came to discussions of the Palestinian "problem." I was sitting at the end of the table at Isaac's left hand. As the talk became more animated, he leaned my way.

"So you see," he said, "there is much yelling when we sit down together. We are not afraid to argue." He lowered his voice. "Do you know how difficult it is for us all to speak English like this?"

It had crossed my mind, and I began making polite noises about how it really wasn't necessary just for our sakes. He waved away my protests, and once again I wondered what we were doing there. Just then, Rachel came in from the kitchen carrying a huge, colorful cake, which she placed on the table. The conversation dribbled away.

"It's your birthday?" I asked Isaac. The puzzle deepened. "I had no idea. We would have . . ."

"Yes," he said, "I guess it is in a way—my second birthday. *Our* second birthday, mine and Basil's, too. Two years since we both nearly died and were reborn." The penny finally dropped.

Rachel smiled. "Two years ago today, December 6, Isaac had his surgery," she said. "And he's still here. That's something to celebrate."

Basil's second anniversary had occurred exactly a month earlier on November 6, and it came to me for the first time that this important milestone had completely passed us by. I felt a little embarrassed to think that we had been so caught up in the pell-mell of everyday life that we hadn't stopped to at least raise a glass to the fates for bringing us this far, although I suppose it could be seen as testimony to the fact that we really have begun to move on and are no longer living our lives as recovering heart patients. I say us because this thing really did happen to both Basil and me.

Still, we were honored to be included in Rachel and Isaac's celebration of life. Coronary bypass surgery has given Basil and Isaac and all the legions of survivors not just another chance, but another birthday—a rebirthday if you like.

Winter has come again, and the prospect of the days ahead presses down upon us. The older we get, the harder this season is to bear, especially now in the weeks leading up to Christmas when the daylight—what there is of it—is a miserly thing. Each day seems to struggle from meager sunrise to halfhearted midday before dwindling into premature dusk. As I write this, I look out over the monotones of the countryside in winter. The slate-gray hills looming beyond the bare white fields. An occasional snowflake flounders past the window. Chickadees dart among the spruce boughs. At least they, in their unknowingness, are cheerful.

It is best not to contemplate what lies ahead. That really is the only way to deal with winter, to refuse to think about it. Best to just live it. Take each day as it comes. Growing old, my grandmother once told me, is not for the fainthearted. That was when she could still hold on to the thought; she lived to be ninety-nine. Old age is perpetual winter, and if you aren't careful, it can freeze your soul. Grim as the day looks sitting here at my desk, we will go out anyway. Basil is reading the Saturday paper, in no hurry to leave the warmth of the kitchen. I can smell brownies baking in the oven (yes, chocolate is a heart-healthy food, but more on that later). As we prepare to gather up our coats and scarves and begin the tiresome process of girding ourselves to face the elements, I look out and see that a squall has blown in from Lake Huron. I cannot see the rail fence at the bottom of the yard through the churning curtain of snow.

"On second thought," I say.

"Fine with me." Basil trades his gloves for an oven mitt and removes the pan of brownies to the top of the stove. For some reason, the smell reminds me of skating parties, of a

small girl's cheeks burning with cold, of biting winds on an open field. Beyond the tops of the spruce trees at the edge of the garden, a pool of blue widens in the unremitting whiteness. A pale light pours through and the swirl of snow thins and disappears. I reach for my coat again. Harpo's interest is renewed; he barks and runs to the door.

"Where are you going?" Basil has settled in again by the fire.

"Out. For a walk."

"Wait." He shrugs off his lethargy like an invisible shroud.

With freezing fingers, we strap on our snowshoes and move off, heads bowed into the wind, trudging over a stubbled field blown almost bare until we reach the top of a knoll that looks down over a counterpane of fields and trees. The sky to the north is a wall of deep purple clouds, but overhead a triumphant sun beams briefly from a clear expanse of blue. Already we are warm with exhilaration as we head down into the eerie hush of the forest. There is no wind here, only the creaking of age-old sugar maples clawing the sky with gnarled fingers.

We stop to listen to the silence. And the unspoken truth we share in that moment is how glad we are to be right there, right then. Everything else falls away. Nothing can compare with this.

No matter what happens (and I will, despite my earlier conjecture, take a moment now to contemplate the future), we will be able to bear it. I predict that Basil will live a good long time, a lot longer than he sometimes imagines as he lies awake staring at the shadows cast by the moon on our bedroom walls. Long enough for a hip replacement, for his hair to fall out, and his short-term memory to flicker. He's only forty-six. Twenty more years is nothing; thirty, surely, is the least he can expect. Will he have another heart attack? Not

likely—though it is the thing he fears the most. The slightest sign of a blockage and the small platoon of medical caregivers in his life will intervene.

So far his arterial grafts are holding up beautifully. Should another blockage occur in the next few years, the likeliest scenario is an angioplasty to clear the pipes. It's possible that in ten or twenty years another bypass may be necessary—a prospect that seems unendurable, but if he has to, then so be it. Ten years is a long time in the world of medical science, and research is taking us into unimagined brave new worlds.

Whatever happens, I intend to be around to keep an eye on things. I have invested too much in this guy to let him . . . well, as I was saying, best not to think about the future too hard. We'll just get on with staying as healthy and engaged with life and one another as we can be.

At the outset of this book, when I wrote that this would be a story with a happy ending, I was being somewhat disingenuous. There is only one ending, and its inevitability is the thing we are trying to cheat. They say that age dulls our capacity to feel joy and appreciate beauty. But I have found that the older I get, the more intensely I feel everything. And as each day passes, I am overwhelmed by a billowing sadness at the heartbreaking brevity of each moment. Happy endings? Life is more like a series of beginnings, and looking back over my life, I am amazed at how many chances there have been to start again.

We will, Basil and I, retire to the country some day. We will grow our own vegetables; we will breed Becky and get another dog. We'll go skinny-dipping in the pond with our grandchildren, and we'll bake cherry pies. We'll travel to the south of France. We will argue and despair and get on each other's nerves. (Hoo boy, will we ever.) I'll write another book and read *Don Quixote*. And Basil will gallop across the

fields with the wind in his face and his heart pounding in his chest and nothing else will matter. That's what our life will be—a series of beginnings, of second chances, of stumbling and falling down and getting up and starting out once more. We may never get it exactly right, but we will keep on trying. And we will wake up every morning and begin again.

Excellent Walnut Brownies

I've saved the best for last. Yes, chocolate is good for you. For one thing, it's loaded with antioxidants similar to those found in red wine, which work against the production of bad cholesterol in the blood. The fat in chocolate is mostly good fat, an omega-9 like olive oil. It has no cholesterol and has been found to make the blood less sticky and to relax blood vessels. In addition, eating chocolate is so pleasurable that it stimulates serotonin and endorphins—brain chemicals that may be linked to longevity.

This applies only to good-quality dark or bittersweet chocolate, which have the added advantage of being lower in sugar.

In this recipe, the omega-3-rich walnuts provide an added punch.

4 ounces high-quality bittersweet chocolate, chopped
8 tablespoons butter, cubed*
1 cup sugar
3 large eggs
⅓ cup all-purpose flour
Pinch of salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1½ cups toasted walnuts

Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter an 8-inch-square baking pan. Melt chocolate, butter, and sugar together in microwave or in a heavy saucepan over low heat, stirring occasionally. Set aside to cool.

Beat the eggs in a mixing bowl. Whisk in the flour, salt, and vanilla. Add all but ¼ cup nuts and stir well. Add the chocolate mixture and stir well.

Pour batter into the prepared pan. Sprinkle with remaining nuts and bake for 30 minutes. Cool in the pan for at least three hours. Cut into squares and serve.

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* Try substituting ½ cup olive oil for the butter. The result is surprisingly good. Or do what I do and use half oil and half butter.