

In the rat's head he now possessed, ideas were furiously boiling. He sat up, at last, and once upright he tried to calm himself, to take things as they were. With care, as though inside a body that did not belong to him (which in some way it did not), he shifted on the bed until he was in the position a human would take to get out of it: on the edge of the bed, that is, with his feet hanging downward. But he realized that his feet no longer reached the floor. From the contraction of his bones, he thought, he must have shrunk, though not all that much really, and that would explain, too, why his skin was so wrinkled. He figured his new height at about four feet. He got up, and he looked at himself in the mirror.

He stood unmoving for a long time. And then he lost his composure—he wept in silence at the horror. There were people who kept rats in their houses—physiologists like Houssay, for instance, that experimented with the repulsive creatures. But he, Sabato, had always belonged to the class of people who are nauseated at the mere sight of a rat. It is easily imagined, then, what he felt as he stood before a four-foot-tall rat with cartilaginous wings and the wrinkled, black skin of those hideous creatures. And him *inside it!*

His eyes had grown weaker, and then he suddenly realized that the weakening of his vision was not some passing phenomenon, some product of his emotional state, but rather would actually in time grow worse, until he became totally blind. And he was proven correct: within a few seconds, though those seconds seemed centuries filled with nightmare and disaster, his sight faded to utter blackness. He stood paralyzed, though he felt his heart pounding in tumult and his skin shivering with cold. Then, little by little, he groped his way toward the bed and sat down on the edge of it.

He stayed there a while. And then, unable to contain himself, forgetting his plan, all his rational precautions, he heard himself give a terrible, chilling cry of anguish, a cry for help. It was not a human cry, though; it was the shrill, stomach-churning shriek of a gigantic winged rat. People rushed in, naturally. But no one showed the least surprise. They asked him what had happened, if he felt ill, if he wanted a cup of tea.

It was obvious that no one noticed the change in him. He did not answer, did not speak a single word, thinking that they'd think he had gone mad. He simply decided to try to live somehow, keeping his secret, even in this horrendous state. Because that's the way the will to live is: unconditional and insatiable.

Shelley Jackson

Cancer

The cancer appeared in my living room sometime between eleven and three on a Thursday. I am not sure exactly when, because I suffer from bouts of migraine, and sometimes I miss things, or see things that aren't there, flashing shapes like the blades of warrior goddesses, the vanes of transcendental windmills. A little airborne sprig could go unnoticed some while.

It was barely visible, a pink fizz, like a bloodshot spot of air. It was so small there was no great wonder in its hanging there, the way a feather might rest on an updraft. It is hard for me to admit it now, but when I first saw it, I thought it was pretty. I blew on it. It drifted sideways, but when I looked for it later, it was back where it had been before.

The cancer grew with improbable speed. At first I watched it curiously, almost fondly. Near the center it distended and grew as solid as meat. The branches divided and divided again. It was a starfish with split ends, an animal snowflake.

I did not speak of it to anyone. Once, the neighbor came to ask me to restrain my hedges. She was a nervous woman with a face too old for her hair. Her child was with her, that little blond creature I had once attempted to befriend. The child paid me no attention, but stared past me in the direction of the living room. I intercepted her gaze out of instinct, not any fear I could have named.

I looked at the cancer every day. Perhaps it was as big as a chicken—no, a parakeet—when I set my hand against it. I took one of its twigs and bent it back on itself. I did this out of curiosity, no more. When the tips darkened and began to wilt, I let go and looked up. The little girl was looking at me through the fogged window, her white fingers like claws on the edge of the sill. When she caught my eye she dropped out of sight. By nightfall the limb had straightened itself again, though it was a darker purple where the damage was.

We pop our kitchen sponges in a bath of bleach and dig the moldy grout from around the sink; it is the season for dentistry, manicures, and laser

depilation. We rinse the food off our plates the minute we are finished eating, scrape the soft sludge into the garbage chute with a shudder of distaste. Everything soft seems decayed to us; we wear nylon jogging suits we launder daily, we cut our hair or pull it back into flawless chignons.

Of course I tried to oust the cancer, though I felt ashamed of myself as I jabbed it with the broom, trying to force it out the window. I had tied a kitchen towel around my head, as if I thought the cancer might tangle itself in my hair in its panic. What a figure of fun I seemed to myself, especially when the cancer proved impossible to budge! I should be more clear: it was possible to shift it, but something invisible bound it to the center of the room, and the farther it was from that point, the more insistently it sought to return. (Not like an animal struggling, mind you. More like a buoyant object one tries to force under water.) Finally, I trapped it in my apron—I also wore an apron—and hobbled to the front door with it straining between my legs. On the front porch I met the postman. We looked down at the large mass struggling inside my apron. When I raised my eyes, I was met by such a grotesquely knowing, indeed sympathetic gaze that I dropped my bundle and stepped back, setting the door between us. After this I stopped trying to evict the cancer. Besides, I had thought of something worse than a cancer in my living room: a cancer tapping on my window, or leaning on my doorbell for all the world to see.

Another time I held a match to the tips. They curled into spirals, tight as watch springs, then turned to ash and fell off.

After the operation the little girl had stopped going to school. She seemed to live in the yard. When she spotted me at the window she stopped whatever she was doing until I went away. She was always carrying something: a large piece of chicken wire, a carburetor, a brick. I never saw her with a toy.

I knew that in some way I had secreted the cancer, sneezed it from a nostril. It was not from outside. Every success it enjoyed was evidence against me. In it, you could watch my fault take concrete form; it was a kind of malignant trophy. I thought I could live with it, at first. It is some comfort to get what we deserve, even when we deserve nothing good. Perhaps I was proud of my error, because it was so brightly colored, and took such definite form. To have it was to have something, that was certain. In private I might fit a ring onto one of its digits, a gaudy ring with a yellow stone. I looked at it, you could almost say lovingly: what lawless circus beauty. The stink of the big cats, the glare of the lights! I forgot myself, brought my hands close, almost petting the hairy fringe. But afterwards ran scalding water on my palms.

I thought I could guess the size it would end up. But it grew and grew. It was the size of a badger, then a goat, then an ox. I compare it to animals because it was hot, as if blood ran through it instead of sap. Its body heat tropicked the room. And though it resembled a bush, I guess, more than anything else its own size, it had an animal presence, uncouth, yet sly, subtly critical, disturbingly womanly. If I looked away, and let my mind wander, I was brought back with a start by the feeling that someone was there.

Still, a great leafless bush, with smooth skin like the manzanita. The muscular trunk (it was hardly a trunk; the ganglion, rather) was scarlet. The limbs were streaked with purple, fading to pink toward the ends: pink fretwork against my ceiling. They grew thinner and more translucent, until it took a keen eye to make out where they no longer were. The air itself seemed stained.

We roll things, hard things, across surfaces, hard surfaces, because we have an unquenchable thirst for the clean sound of hard things hitting. We beseech the ovarian sky to let fall the rain it is thick with, we light lighters to purge the flatulent winds, we pull our bedsheets tight and our hospital corners have a truculent look that makes babies cry.