

Cancer Arm

by Kathy Fish

It's Thanksgiving and your mother appears and disappears at will. One second ago, she was touching your shoulder, whispering something funny. You think you might grab hold of her, bury your face in the folds of her neck, but you look up and she's gone. It's as if she's a vapor, sprayed from a can. She smells like Dove soap.

She keeps "The Big Book of Cancer Symptoms" on the coffee table. You can't fathom her guests happily leafing through it as she flies off to blend margaritas, yet there it sits, dwarfing ``Rocky Mountain Sunsets: Complete with Poetry," the book you gave her.

The book has diagrams you can follow, like a maze, starting with one symptom and then answering a series of questions, weaving your way down the page. Sometimes you're led off to one side where the book tells you, "This is the common cold." Or you're led all the way to the bottom of the page where it says "See your doctor immediately" in red letters. The pages are embossed with your mother's fingerprints.

It's Thanksgiving and you always sit next to your brother-in-law, Peter, who is easily the smartest one of the whole bunch, yet nobody listens to him. Undaunted, Peter keeps on talking. He always knows when you're lying, which is often. He's a sort of savant lie detector. You ask him to pass the peas. He asks why you're late. And you say, "long distance phone call from an old friend" and he says, "Bullshit" plucking a hair off your sweater and you say, "You're right! Please pass the buns."

Your mother listens to Deepak Chopra's books on tape. It is a sort of project of hers. You always pronounce his name ChokeRa and she

corrects you. Deepak Chopra says you shouldn't think too much about cancer or you will get it.

Well then.

What your mother doesn't know is that you're terrified. You think about it all the time. Cancer cancer cancer. Cancer leg. Cancer arm. You've eaten too many cancer hot dogs and sausages in your life. You've gotten too many cancer sunburns. Cancer throat. Cancer head. Too much cancer sex.

Your thoughts have the power to change the structure of your cells, cancerizing them. You can feel it and it rattles you.

It's Thanksgiving and you are six years old. Your knee socks are pulled up over your kneecaps. Rusty, your Golden Retriever, is under the table and now and then you drop a piece of turkey on the floor for him. What you'd really like is a Tollhouse cookie or some muskmelon, cut into chunks. You think Rusty's distended stomach is from eating too much, though in truth, he hardly eats at all. He won't make it to Christmas and neither will your father. Everyone knows this but you.

You cheated on your husband one month after you were married. Peter knows, but he doesn't judge. Oh how you love Peter!

Peter leans over, says, "How are you, Doll?" and you want to say, "I'm hurting. I can't sleep. All food tastes like old cheese and I'm alarmed" but you tell him you're splendid. And he says, "You're not" and you imagine the word biopsy floating between the two of you, in bubble letters.

The word sounds happy to you, almost drunken. Biopsy is whimsy's

first cousin. It is a daisy chain wrapped around the neck of a child. Who could worry over something so pretty?

Today, there are all these people. Your sister, Kate, and Peter. Your uncles who never married, Uncle Fred who served in Nam and Uncle Brian who still pulls quarters out of your ears and the neighbor couple, Martin and Marie, who come every year because they have no family of their own. There is way too much food and the table's crowded and you'd still rather have a cookie or a wiener on a bun or a bowl of oatmeal than the slabs of steaming turkey breast, the outsized mounds of mashed potatoes. You have always hated this meal. You catch yourself leaning down to touch Rusty's head, and this makes you laugh and cry at the same time.

It's Thanksgiving and your mother's house has gone golden and clotted with voices. Your mother waits for you to lean back so she can set down a plate of sweet potato pie. Exasperated, she flutters away, but you catch her wrist, draw her hand to your lips and kiss it, just in time.

