RUN TOWARDS THE DANGER

CONFRONTATIONS WITH A BODY OF MEMORY

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With illustrations by Lauren Tamaki

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Preface

"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure mine *only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."*

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The working title of this book was "Living Backwards," inspired by the Queen's suggestion to Alice that memory can work more than one way. "Living Backwards," though, sounds like a memoir that covers the scope of a lifetime. If this were a memoir or an autobiography, it would be woefully incomplete. I am both far luckier than these essays would imply if they were read as a map of my life, and I have experienced more trauma than I have given chapters to.

I originally wrote these essays as stand-alone pieces. I wrote some of them over many years, in some cases decades, abandoning them for long stretches, unsure if I had the courage to finish them or if they had

a place in the world. As the essays began to shape themselves into a book, I realized that the connective tissue between them was a dialogue that was occurring between two very different time frames in my life. The past was affecting how I moved through the world, while present life was affecting how the past moved through me.

I've been acutely aware that my childhood experiences inform my current life. I have, until recently, been less conscious of the power of my adult life to inform my relationship to my memories. When I was lucky enough to have experiences in adulthood that echoed pivotal, difficult memories, and to have those experiences go another, better way than they had in the past, my relationship to those memories shifted. The meaning of long-ago experiences transformed in the context of the ever-changing present.

The past and present, I have come to realize, are in constant dialogue, acting upon one another in a kind of reciprocal pressure dance.

When I first met concussion specialist Dr. Michael Collins, after three and a half years of suffering from post-concussive syndrome, he said, "If you remember only one thing from this meeting, remember this: run towards the danger." In order for my brain to recover from a traumatic injury, I had to retrain it to strength by charging towards the very activities that triggered my symptoms. This was a paradigm shift for me—to greet and welcome the things I had previously avoided.

As I recovered from my concussion, "run towards the danger" became a kind of incantation for me in relation to the rest of my life. I began to hear it as a challenge to take on the project of addressing and questioning my own narratives.

What follows are some of the most dangerous stories of my life: the ones I have avoided, the ones I haven't told, the ones that have kept me awake on countless nights. These are stories that have haunted and directed me, unwittingly, down circuitous paths. As these stories found echoes in my adult life, and then went another, better way than they did in childhood, they became lighter and easier to carry.

These stories don't add up to a portrait of a life, or even a snapshot of one. They are about the transformative power of an ever-evolving relationship to memory. Telling them is a form of running towards the danger.

Alice,
Collapsing

"I could tell you my adventures—beginning from this morning," said Alice a little timidly: "but it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

At least twice a week, I used to find myself in a periwinkle-blue poufy dress with a white pinafore. My stockings were striped and my hair was held firmly by a headband that dug into my head behind my ears. My breasts, still tender and growing, were painfully flattened by a tensor bandage. It was a dream that I frequently found myself in, where nothing anyone around me said made any sense and it was all hostile: hostile towards my common sense, hostile towards my youth, hostile towards my growing up. I knew I didn't want to be a child; I wanted to be a queen but I didn't want to be left alone, or tested, or made fun of or to do all the things that seemed to be necessary to become a queen. I would follow corkscrew paths. I had to run in order to stay in the same place. People would scream in pain before they were hurt. There was a mint in my mouth for good luck. I wanted to kill myself.

Sometimes when I woke from this dream, I remembered that I was, in fact, wearing a rose-coloured dress and not a blue one. Sometimes I corrected my subconscious. Most of the time, though, I woke up incapable of differentiating the portrait of myself from the iconic John Tenniel illustrations, coloured in modern reprints. I wonder if Alice Liddell had had the same problem.

The real Alice was a sullen-looking child with dark hair and eyes. In one of the photographs that Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) took of her, "The Beggar Maid," she looks alarmingly sexual, taunting him, challenging him to want more. At least that's how I viewed the photograph when I was a young teenager. As I look at the same photograph now, as a grown woman, I wonder what instructions the adult taking the photograph gave to her to produce such an alarming effect. In the books and movies that were consumed by millions, though, Alice is golden and fair, WASPy beyond measure, and exudes innocence. The books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, have passed through children's hands for over a century now, cloaked in this deceptive costume.

Ever since I can remember, these books inspired a terror and an exasperation in me. Every one of Alice's attempts to make sense of her new, irrational world, to find anything approximating normalcy, or to simply get home is thwarted by mean-spirited creatures with their own irrational systems of logic. Despite my father's love of these books, I never, as a young child, wanted to hear them read at bedtime. They left me exhausted, haunted by a kind of relentless uncertainty. I feared that if I took any time to live inside these stories, the walls and ceiling of my childhood bedroom might soon collapse into dust and be replaced by kooky angles of drywall.

As an adult, I experience this same aversion to movies that remind me of the *Alice* books or that mirror this same quality of someone constantly trying to get somewhere and failing. Movies like *After Hours* make we want to scream. They make me feel nauseous and aggravated and goosepimply.

I hate stories in which people can't get to where they're going.

As there seemed to be no chance of getting her hands up to her head, she tried to get her head down to them, and was delighted to find that her neck would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent. She had just succeeded in curving it down into a graceful zigzag . . .

"But I'm not *a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. "I'm a—I'm a—"*

"Well! What *are you?" said the Pigeon. "I can see you're trying to invent something!"*

"I—I'm a little girl," said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

When I was fifteen years old I got caught through the looking glass in a pink dress, in a crisp white pinafore, with my breasts bound, playing younger than I was. My spine had by then bent—perhaps, I thought then, under the weight of grief—to a forty-five-degree angle, so along with the tensor bandages pulled tightly across my chest, the pink dress itself was lined with various strategically placed pads to make my shoulders, my back, and my waist appear symmetrical. Even then, it took effort to appear straight. On two-show days I would begin to sag sideways, the tips of my left hand's fingers almost touching the side of my left knee. One of my left ribs, just under my breasts, protruded so much that it created a noticeable lump right in the middle of my torso, causing the right rib to slough out of view.

I knew I had to wear a hard plastic brace sixteen hours a day to make my body grow straighter, but I didn't, so every few months I, and others, noticed that I twisted and bent a little more. By this point I knew I was close to needing major surgery to correct the curve, but that was to be

my choice too, having no parent to oversee such choices. The surgery terrified me, not only the idea of being cut into and operated on for ten hours, having my spine stretched out, fused, and a pound of metal attached to it, but also I couldn't think who would take care of me while I recovered. I had stopped going to regular follow-ups at the hospital a long time before, had stopped wearing the brace around my body sixteen hours a day as prescribed, had stopped thinking about what the consequences of my negligence could be. I knew that I was free to keep twisting and curving and sloping and that nothing, ever, would stop me. There was no adult who could force me straight.

But I wondered, now, at fifteen years old, if the thing I had feared the most, the prospect of this major spinal surgery, could liberate me from something I found myself fearing even more: walking even one more time onto a stage at the Stratford Festival.

I had been diagnosed with scoliosis four years earlier during a routine insurance medical for the television series *Road to Avonlea*. The doctor asked me to touch my toes, and then spent a while tracing the protrusion of my spine with his fingers. When I stood up straight again and looked at him, his brow was furrowed.

It somehow made sense to me to be told that I wasn't straight, that my spine was curving nonsensically to the right at the top and to the left at the bottom. My world had started curving out of shape the previous year, and my own body curving alongside it gave things a logical symmetry. It also made sense of a few things that had been mysterious to me about my ever-changing body, chiefly (and most important to my eleven-year-old self) the noticeably lopsided breasts that had begun to emerge, the left one growing large and ripe while the other one remained almost nonexistent.

I was alone in the examining room with the doctor when he made the discovery, and when he said the word *scoliosis*, it sounded like death. My mother had died just months before, and my experience of diseases was that they didn't hold back. They took you and maimed you and ended you. So when I heard the diagnosis of something with a *-sis* on the end of it, I assumed that my days were numbered. He referred me to the orthopaedics department at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, and that is where I found myself a month later, in a waiting room with similarly crooked kids, all of us waiting to hear how badly we'd been bent out of shape.

After a trip to the X-ray machine it was determined that I had a thirty-eight-degree curvature in my thoracic spine. I stared, transfixed, at the X-ray. It was strange to see that my own spine, lit from behind by the light board, had been hiding secrets from me. For years it had been surreptitiously bending itself into the ugly beginnings of a coil. It seemed impossible that I could be so deformed. Impossibly scary, and impossibly lucky.

The feeling of being lucky was one I kept to myself. There had been a part of me that, while my mother was dying, had relished having a parent with cancer. *Cancer* was a powerful word, one you could throw around with immediate results. It seemed to inspire a focus from people. They looked at you with what was supposed to be sympathy but felt, in fact, like a kind of exaltation. When my mother had cancer, I felt as though I was suddenly transformed into a sallow child of tragedy, imbued with a kind of magic that only children close to grim events can be. I was comfortable in this role, and delighted to help move the play forward, saying the word *cancer* in a hushed tone with an accomplished look of dread, reporting on my mother's latest surgery or round of chemotherapy with my eyes downcast and bashful in the face of the enormous attention it garnered. It helped that I never once really believed my mother was going to die. It allowed me the space to focus on other people's reactions and to delight in the special

place I had earned in their hearts. I knew I was exaggerating, making it up. Deep inside, I believed that my mother had something very innocuous dressed up with a scary word, and I was just using the drama of this disease to get attention. I believed this until her actual death, which, for a long time, some part of me felt I was responsible for. By playing the part of the child with the dying mother so convincingly, I believed I had summoned a bad ending.

But I had missed the word *cancer* these last months. And now part of me was glad to have one to take its place.

I found out early on in my appointment with the orthopaedic surgeon at the Hospital for Sick Children that scoliosis wouldn't kill me. This was good news and bad. Good, because I'm pretty sure I didn't want to die at that point in time. Bad, because it limited my ability to create that same kind of wonder in adults that a dying mother had. "How did I get it?" I asked the doctor. She told me it was genetic. Since no one else in my family had scoliosis, I decided that it must be grief, the sadness I couldn't yet feel about my mother's death, bearing down on me until my spine bent, forcing me to feel it any way it could.

There were a couple of ways to treat scoliosis, according to my doctor. The first option, for the less severe cases, was to wear a tight plastic brace, which wrapped around the torso, for sixteen hours a day in the hopes that it would alter the course of the curving spine as the pubescent body continued to grow. The more severe cases had to be operated on. The spine would be stretched out, fused with graft from the hip bone, and two steel rods would be placed on either side of the spine to keep it in place as the graft took hold and hardened. The rods would be attached with many hooks and nuts and bolts, adding up to about a pound of metal in the back.

I was on the cusp of these grim options. I was fitted within the month for a total-contact thoraco-lumbar-sacral orthosis (TLSO) brace. This

was a relief in itself, as the other brace option, which was horrifically detailed in *Deenie*, a Judy Blume book I had read, was the Milwaukee brace, which included a Frankenstein-esque ring of metal around the neck. The one I was being fitted for, the TLSO brace, came up to just below my chest in the front, though in the back it came up to just below the neck. It was hard plastic, with two thick Velcro straps that ran across the front, attached to the brace by eight little metal discs, giving it a robotic look. Most humiliating, the brace had been made from a cast of my body, so there was the actual shape of my body right there in front of me and anyone who saw the brace, hips just forming, rib cage uneven, a body in progress. Firm pads were strategically placed on the right side, where my upper and middle back fit into the brace, to help push my spine as it grew into something approximating straightness. There was also a hard pad in between these two, on the left side, to try to push the bottom part of the S into straightness. When they first strapped me into it in the hospital, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I was told I would get used to it, though the hard pads digging into my spine would likely give me welts for the first while. I was shown how to put it on, though not given a practice run putting it on by myself there at the hospital.

It turned out that getting it on at home alone was almost impossible. Pulling clothes up over it required some doing. Living in a body that changed suddenly and unpredictably with puberty required some doing, even without being strapped into a hard plastic brace.

It was recommended that I sleep all night in the brace, to cover at least half of the sixteen hours I was required to wear it, especially since I had to work on the television show *Road to Avonlea* during the days, and it would be hard to be as physical as I needed to be in certain scenes while wearing it. The first night, I struggled to pull the straps to the markings they had made with a pen at the hospital to show me when it was pulled tight enough. After a long struggle, I cried out that I couldn't do it. My dad ended up pulling me into the brace. I hated having him close me

into that contraption. I was red with rage. He didn't deserve my anger, but he was the only parent in sight and no eleven-year-old girl wants her dad manipulating her body. After that first night, I pulled the straps away from my body with every bit of strength and frustration I had, hurting my arms and hands and crying with the effort, but managing, crucially, to avoid needing my dad's assistance.

This hard, tight contraption was constricting and sweaty and it was difficult to sleep. After two days I had big red welts in all the places where the pads touched my skin. The thin undershirts I was given to wear underneath the brace were drenched with sweat when I took it off in the afternoon. After my mother died, my dad and I didn't do laundry, ever, so they soon smelled terrible, and my eleven-year-old brain didn't compute that the solution to this problem might be to just wash them.

I had to buy new clothes to accommodate the extra thickness the brace added to my body, so my on-set tutor and guardian, Laurie, who worked on the TV show I was on, took me out one weekend to a department store, where I sobbed in a change room as I realized I couldn't bend over in the brace to pull up my pants. I became terrified of gym class at school, and beforehand I would steal into a bathroom stall to take off the brace out of view, and return after class to put it back on. But pubescent children are aggressively observant, and by the end of my first day at school in the brace, a friend remarked loudly, in front of a group of kids, that I had "no butt." And then she wanted answers from me. "Are you aware that you don't have any butt?" The brace went straight down over my back and flattened me. I was dumbstruck with shame.

They had to remake all my costumes for *Road to Avonlea*, so I spent a lot of time standing in front of three or four people, in my underwear in the brace, while women and men took measurements and held bolts of fabric up against my torso. I felt more exposed than if I had been naked.

After about two years, I realized that no one would notice whether I continued to wear the brace or not. A young teenager often requires enforcement from an adult to do uncomfortable or painful things for their own good. My dad was not an enforcer, and it dawned on me that he probably wouldn't notice or care if I took a break. I started by skipping the occasional day, and then eventually stopped wearing it altogether. My spine, released from the prodding of the brace's pads, began growing amok, while I tried to compensate for my breasts, which were growing wildly uneven, by wearing push-up bras that would create a kind of shelf of one continuous breast rather than two uneven ones.

By the time I was fourteen years old, my right shoulder blade jutted out dramatically farther than the left one, and I slumped over to the left, so far that my left fingertips touched the side of my knee if I relaxed my body. I almost never did. I walked around forcing myself straight, forcing my right shoulder back and my torso upright, no matter how much it hurt. I would comment on how well the brace seemed to be working, loudly, and without provocation, at work and when relatives would visit. I didn't want to risk anyone asking me about whether or not I was wearing that torturous contraption. I went to a follow-up appointment at the Hospital for Sick Children, where a jocular orthopaedic surgeon said things like "You're a good kid, Charlie Brown" and "Well, you're getting close to the point where we may have to consider surgery soon, but you've escaped the knife this time!"

I decided, since my mind was made up to rid myself of this godawful brace, that it would be prudent to stop going to my checkups, lest someone get it into their head to cut my back open and fix it. Lest I didn't "escape the knife" the next time.

By fourteen, I had moved out of the family home in Aurora where I had lived alone with my father, and no one would ever know again whether I was missing my appointments or not.

My father, after my mother died, had fallen apart. It's possible that he was always apart, and my mother had just, for many years and with great effort, held him together. Or perhaps he fell apart in a manner that many men of his generation would have after the woman who had done every practical thing in their lives for them for years died. His falling apart didn't seem to cause him concern. Or perhaps it did and he just couldn't fathom what to do about it. And so he did nothing. My siblings, who were all much older than I, had moved out of the house a long time before, leaving the house empty when I was at work or school. My dad sat in front of the TV all day, every day. At night he would play endless games of solitaire. I fell asleep, many nights, to the rhythmic *flick*, *flick*, *flick* of his cards on the coffee table, hearing them wind down into shorter numbers of flicks as he got closer to the ends of the lines of cards as he finished setting up the game. The cards became grimy, with little patches of black dirt on them. They had a specific sharp smell of filth that I can still conjure to this day. After a couple of years, the cards were so faded from constant use that it was impossible to see what the images on many of them had been. Was this a new challenge he had created for himself, to have a hand in imagining what the cards might be as they grew impossible to decipher? My guess is that he would say it was just laziness, it was too much effort to buy a new pack. My dad spoke often of his idleness with resignation and a dash of glee, which made it seem as though a relaxed charm was responsible for all the things he hadn't done and wasn't doing.

Shockingly, after my mother died, he slowly learned how to cook, which was quite extraordinary for a man over fifty who had never even made himself a sandwich. He didn't, however, learn how to clean. I don't ever remember him doing laundry. Not once. When the sheets became unbearable on my bed, I simply took them off and slept on the bare mattress or moved to another empty bedroom in the house. This went on for years.

One year, we went to my Auntie Ann's house for Christmas. I was struck by how clean and comfortable things were in her house, in such marked

contrast to ours. I was used, by now, to a thick layer of dust covering every surface. On the car ride home, I made a meticulous list of every surface in the house that I would clean, in order, when we got home.

The next day, I fished around in the back of the cupboard under the sink for cleaning supplies and found some rusty cans of Pledge and a bottle of Vim that hadn't been touched in a long time. I worked my way through my list of surfaces to polish as though it was more reliable than my eyes. I cleaned every surface in the house, cloths turning black from a single wipe over a side table or mantelpiece. My dad looked at me, eyes wide, shaking his head. "You've gone mad," he said, somewhat admiringly.

But the house soon went back to its business of collecting dust, and I lost enthusiasm for doing another three-day stint of cleaning. Eventually there were messes that couldn't be cleaned up anyway. The cigarette burns in the arms of the recliner my dad would fall asleep in while watching soccer, the TV blaring so loud it could be heard from the end of the driveway. Corners chewed off the furniture by my untrained bichon frise puppy, Mookie, as my dad cursed and swore.

When I was thirteen, my father and I went on a trip to Europe. We went to France, Greece, and England. I had conceived this trip and offered to pay for it out of my acting earnings, and my dad had said yes, making it contingent on my giving permanent custody of Mookie to Auntie Ann and my cousin Sarah in Stratford. As I lived an hour and a half away from the school I attended for a small portion of the year, I was often isolated from all friends except my dog, who no one had bothered to train, who still pissed and shat on the floor every day, and who I loved desperately as he slept with his little chin perched on my neck at night. I can't figure out exactly why I agreed to give up Mookie, except that I think I knew that he was being terribly neglected; when I was at work for twelve to fifteen hours a day, my dad would often not let him out or even put out food for him. The dog was my responsibility. Those were the terms of the contract my parents had made with me when they

agreed to get me a puppy as my mother was dying. My father was not flexible on the terms, whatever my work or school obligations.

The trip to Europe was an agony. It turned out that while I wanted to see all these places (the Eiffel Tower! the Tower of London!), I did not want to see them with my father, who made increasingly strange jokes about us being a couple. He would say, loudly, after requesting a room with only one bed as he checked us into a hotel in Paris, "Ha! It's as though we are Humbert Humbert and Lolita!" I flooded with rage and humiliation and tried not to look at him for days. It didn't stop him from repeating the joke many times. These types of jokes were in keeping with his lack of regard for sacred cows in conversation and in humour, but I just wanted to go home where I could get away from him.

My one fond memory of our trip was a day we spent visiting the British Museum in childlike wonder together. He bought me two prints of maps of the world from the gift shop. They were drawn hundreds of years ago. The continents drawn on these rudimentary maps were too close together, or too far apart. Young, sloppy-looking sketches of a world that hadn't yet been accurately discovered.

The following summer my dad played golf all day, every day, leaving me alone, dogless, in the hollow, filthy house. I would smoke cigarettes, read books, and do stretches in my room. I remember pulling my leg up and towards myself while I lay on my back and thinking, in a logic that seemed obvious to my thirteen-year-old self: "Okay. I'm basically grown now. I smoke, I have my period. Now all I have to do to be an adult is have sex. And get out of here."

By fourteen I had moved in with my brother's ex-girlfriend Laura, a twenty-four-year-old assertive, emotionally generous woman who had a two-bedroom apartment in north Toronto. On a visit to see her in the city one day, I asked if I could move in and offered to split the rent, and as she had always felt protective and fond of me, she agreed. I told my

dad about my plan, and it made rational sense to him that I wanted to move out. He prided himself on "not being a father but a friend." He didn't believe in any separation between children and adults and the conversations they should or should not have. Nothing was sacred, all were equal. We had, for years now (on the nights when I didn't have to work the next day, leaving him to play solitaire by himself), stayed up late at night together, smoking cigarettes, talking about books. By the time I was thirteen I had read all of D.H. Lawrence's books, and then on to the Bloomsbury group's work, with my father as my guide and nightly book club. Whenever I suggested a new book, he insisted that we do a lot of reading leading up to it, to give it context. (It took us about six months of background reading to get to James Joyce's *Ulysses*.) One night, he told me that when he was my age, he had had a nervous breakdown. He had wanted to learn everything all at once, and his hunger for learning was so voracious that it began to consume him. He became manic, unable to rest, and after weeks of sleepless nights, reading, working on math problems he had created for himself, and unable to satiate himself with knowledge, he fell apart completely. He was a working-class kid, but the headmaster had taken a liking to him, and the school he went to raised funds for him to go on a vacation to recover his sanity. Spurning sleep to stay up with him, reading and talking, I understood his story, his hunger, on a visceral level. (This story, by the way, was disputed by some members of my dad's family, who have no memory of it whatsoever.)

When it came to learning—or indeed any activity of any sort—my father believed that everything must be for the sake of itself rather than some greater ambition. The story my father told most often about himself as a youth was one in which, at the last moment, he ran in a race he had not trained for. He had been asked to replace a sick runner to represent his school. Not caring about running particularly, and knowing he had no chance of winning, he made a game for himself: he would treat the passing of each runner in front of him as a major victory. And so he ran the race this way, trying to pass each runner as

though it were the end goal, celebrating each small triumph, until the end, when he suddenly realized there was only one more runner in front of him. He gunned towards the finish line, bewildered by the unexpected ending of having won the entire race.

It was a self-aggrandizing story, but he told it with such intense drama that, listening to it, you rooted for him to pass each person he was racing against and celebrated with him each time he did. This was emblematic of his relationship to success. He believed it was acceptable only if it had been realized effortlessly, without ambition, almost by accident, and born out of a love of the moment, a commitment to overcoming the present, immediate challenge, instead of a long-term strategy. I loved his stories, and their out-of-step-with-society perspective, even if I had heard most of them a thousand times.

So it wasn't an unhappy relationship with my dad, just a very complicated one, just a very adult one, in a house that was falling apart with mice and moths infesting many rooms, and far too many conversations about the tragic pathos of pedophiles.

Shortly after I moved out of my dad's house, I fell in love with a boy at my high school. He was four years older than me, moody, cynical, and funny; he wore a black overcoat every day and called himself Eddie Mars. It took me months to discover that this wasn't his real name but one pilfered from the classic film *The Big Sleep*. His real name was Corey Mintz. I loved him and I was loved by him. Even now, at forty-one, I can look back on this relationship and say that what was between Corey and me really was love. He had a terrible relationship with his father and stepmother, who he lived with. My mother was dead, and my father prided himself on not being a father. We were parentless, and so we became each other's parents.

At the time I met Corey I had already been cast in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* at the Stratford Festival the following summer. I was

scared of being onstage generally, but performing at Stratford for the first time and getting an immersion in theatre education sounded like a more intellectual pursuit than the TV show I had been contractually bound to for years, and my Auntie Ann, cousin Sarah, and her daughter Rebekkah, all of whom I adored, lived there. But I don't think I said yes to the opportunity for any of those reasons. Even though I had little interest in acting at that point, I think I said yes because my dad, when he heard that I might play Alice, had a kind of histrionic reaction of uncontainable joy. It wasn't just that he found my character on *Road to Avonlea* boring (something he told me even when I was twelve and locked into my contract for a few more years). He was obsessed with the *Alice* books, and even more so with Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and his love for Alice Liddell. I had watched *Dreamchild*, a film about their relationship, with him several times as he gasped and wept beside me. He found the unrequited love of a grown man for a child exquisitely moving, and he cried every time he saw Ian Holm attempt to profess his love for Alice and fail.

At one point in the film, Alice's mother has a conversation with Alice about her daughter's strange interactions with Dodgson.

"Mr. Dodgson seems to confess a remarkable number of things to you," Alice's mother says.

"He says that every man should have someone he can trust his secrets with," Alice replies.

"But why on earth should he say that to *you*?" her mother asks, concerned.

"Because he loves me, of course," says little Alice.

In the film, Dodgson constantly feels rejection and humiliation when he is with Alice. Dodgson has a stutter, which the Liddell girls mock

behind his back and struggle not to laugh at in front of him. Each time he is about to lay himself bare and profess his love to Alice, she turns away, or manages to dodge the conversation. In one particularly haunting moment, Dodgson is staring lovingly at Alice while rowing her down a river on a perfect summer day, and she intentionally splashes him in the face. He is hurt and humiliated. When Alice's mother reprimands her for her cruelty, he does his best to cover for her, to say that it is of no concern. His attempt to smooth over the situation and to leave Alice free of consequences for her actions only makes the moment sadder. The film overall, as I saw it then, took the sympathetic side of a grown man who is in love with a little girl. In fact, the experience of watching this film so ingrained in me the perspective of the older man in this dynamic that my first (autobiographical) film script, many years later, took the side of a man who had stalked me as a child, and painted me as a hideous brat. (I never made that film.)

I was raised with the relationship between Dodgson and Liddell as an iconic one: the pathos of the older man, the coldness of the child who rejects him, mocks him. I never questioned it as being odd that my father shared this world, this perspective with me, so constantly. Though I hated the *Alice* books themselves and the feeling of being trapped in a prison of the frustration they left me with, I was able to feel intense sympathy for Dodgson as I watched the movie alongside my father. I was able to hate Alice, the child who broke his heart. It was this Alice—precocious, self-aware, sexual, and powerful—that stayed with me. It was this Alice that I thought I was going to Stratford to play.

"What size do you want to be?" . . .

"Oh, I'm not particular as to size," Alice hastily replied; "only one doesn't like changing so often, you know."

—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

In my real life at fifteen years of age, I felt myself to be a woman, fully grown, with full breasts, living by now with Corey in an apartment far away from any parent. In Stratford I was suddenly a child again, mothered by my aunt and cousin as though I were very little, my body literally bound into smallness onstage as Alice. In any given hour I was growing and shrinking, growing and shrinking, like Alice drinking the various potions in Wonderland. I had gone through the looking glass of my own life. In Toronto I was completely independent—monitored by and connected to only my nineteen-year-old high school dropout boyfriend. In Stratford in that summer of 1994, I had the two most maternal women in the world tending to my every need, feeding me delicious food, reading classic books with me on huge plush couches in a house full of flowers and intricate wallpaper. I contributed exactly nothing to the household. I'm not sure if I ever even brought a dish to the sink after eating from it, so relieved was I to sink into the indulgence I was experiencing after years of being prematurely independent. If I had a small cold, my aunt would call the theatre to say I couldn't possibly come in for rehearsal because I was sick. I had never before, even with high fevers, vomiting, and strep throat, missed a day of work on a film set. I went from being motherless in Toronto to being mothered beyond reason in Stratford.

My Auntie Ann and my cousin Sarah made three beautiful meals a day. There were dozens of soft, gorgeous places to sit. Everything seemed baked in flowers. Blossoms and vines crawled up the walls in traditional wallpapers. Even the armchairs had extensions to be sprawled out on.

While Rebekkah, Sarah's ten-year-old daughter, either read with us or watched endless episodes of *Star Trek*, we would spend hours drinking tea and reading together in the afternoons, either on the feather cushions of the living room couches or, on hot days, while sipping lemonade on the shaded porch, verdant with hanging plants. At night I'd put on little performances, imitating my brothers and sisters, and pulling Rebekkah into the act. Auntie Ann and Sarah laughed harder than they likely meant to at my jokes. They were the two most well-read, astute women I have ever met. Sarah, who was quiet, thoughtful, and wise, had studied English literature and had edited a poetry magazine by the time she was seventeen. A single mother in her twenties, she had dedicated her life to her child and to making the world feel safe and possible for her, while running a small store filled with beautiful things, some of them made by her mother.

My Auntie Ann was an extraordinary artist who was now dedicating herself to making exquisite things in a way she hadn't had time to while raising her five children. She had gone to art school in England when she was young and around that time met a Canadian scientist and fallen deeply in love. She recounted to me how he had told her early on, in plain terms, that he wanted to marry a woman who would stay home and take care of children while he worked. She loved him, and agreed. Though she'd had what sounded like a happy marriage before her husband's death from cancer, and five children she adored, as she told me this story she stared off into space for a moment and said, "I sometimes wonder why I agreed to give it all up so easily." But her art never stopped. She made exquisite dolls based on characters from Shakespeare and Molière; convex mirrors with sculpted and painted frames that reflected back to you the off-kilter nature of the world, and of yourself.

Sarah was reading all of Fay Weldon's books that summer, and would get our attention every now and then to read out an especially funny line. I read George Eliot, starting with an old, musty copy of *Silas Marner* that I loved the smell and weathered texture of and continuing with the

books my aunt brought home from the library every week. Once I looked up from my book and said, to no one in particular, that I had felt depressed for a lot of my life. Auntie Ann didn't look up as she said, "Well, that's not so bad. It's a sign of intelligence. It's the village idiot who walks around all day with a big smile on his face." She managed to combine the warm, nurturing haze she created with an acerbic wit worthy of Dorothy Parker and an intolerance of the flaws in many of the people she encountered. If you were inside her bubble you were doted upon and loved beyond reason. If you weren't, you might be torn to shreds, which, for better or for worse, made the love I experienced in that house feel even more authentic and rare. I loved being in her small collection of cherished things.

(Later in life, when Auntie Ann lived alone and was beginning to feel isolated, she surprised everyone by joining a seniors' group, thinking she should make more of an effort to have more friends. To her horror, some of the people in the group started calling her, actually wanting to become her friend. She recounted this as a chilling horror story, replete with details of how stupid they all were, inviting her to barbecues, which she called "carcinogenic nonsense." She laughed so hard she cried at her naïveté in thinking she might like these people, as well as at her own intolerance of them. At another point, she joined a group called the Culture Vultures, which travelled around by bus to interesting places. She lobbied them to change their name, as the people in the group weren't, in her opinion, cultured or even very interesting.)

I have never, before or since, felt so taken care of, so bathed in feminine love as I did that summer. Sometimes as we read together, my beloved dog Mookie, who I had given up years before, would come and put his head on my lap, a recognition in his calm. I would try not to feel his weight, try not to feel the love and sadness that his presence evoked in me. I think I took him for a walk once in five months. I simply couldn't find it within me to love a creature I had abandoned.

"Who are you*?" said the Caterpillar.*

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was *when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."*

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!"

"I can't explain myself*, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."*

"I don't see," said the Caterpillar.

"I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."

—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The first read-through of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* in the rehearsal hall began with James Reaney (who had written the adaptation for the stage) speaking to the cast about Lewis Carroll and his relationship with Alice Liddell. I can't remember exactly what he said, but he addressed the underbelly of the book, the longing in it and the subtext—which can hardly even be called subtext when it's so obvious—that Dodgson was most likely a pedophile, in love with the real Alice for whom he wrote the books. *Through the Looking-Glass*, written years after *Wonderland*, was written in sadness and nostalgia. Dodgson had become estranged from Alice Liddell and her family after an incident on one of the river outings they took together. Dodgson's journal is missing three crucial entries from these days, torn out after his death by

a protective family member. It is not clear what happened that day, but it has long been speculated that Charles Dodgson crossed a line with Alice Liddell that propelled her mother to finally break contact between him and her family.

James Reaney's thoughtful analysis of the undercurrents of the *Alice* stories was fascinating to me, and I felt as though he was talking about the story I had always known. Marti Maraden, the empathetic, joyful director, got up after James had left to say that while everything James had shared was very interesting, and likely even true, Dodgson had also written this tale "to delight children." That was the spirit in which we as a company would be moving forward as we presented this play. We would mount this production, she said again, "to delight children." She said that several times, to make sure it sunk in, and I think, perhaps, to inoculate us against the perverse paths we might be tempted down. We were there to delight children. Something clanged in me, dissonant, an echoing gong of an inner knowing; something felt off, something felt strange. I pushed it away. I was here, as it turned out, "to delight children." Not to conjure the Alice of long ago whom Dodgson fell in love with, not to call forth the spirit of the twisted sexuality in the relationship between the writer and his young muse. "Delight children" was my marching order. (I mustn't tell my father.)

I was nervous as I read my part in front of the cast during that first reading of the play. I hadn't yet begun my voice lessons, so my voice was small and scared, a voice meant for film and television, not the stage. Afterwards, the lovely Bill Needles (who would play the White King) and Mervyn Blake (the Red King), in their seventies and eighties respectively, came up to tell me that they loved my reading. I don't think it was true, but they were exceedingly kind to me throughout my time at Stratford.

Douglas Rain, a legendary classical actor who had also been the voice of HAL in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and who had been a terrifying

icon at the festival for years, nodded curtly and gruffly said, "Hello. I couldn't hear you." I smiled at him. I liked him right away. There are certain people from whom you can immediately intuit that their fiercest expression of warmth is brutalizing honesty. He looked at me grinning back at him, and I think he saw that flash of recognition. I saw him try to suppress a smile as he walked away. But I was scared. I was scared of my voice and how small it was. I was scared that no matter how hard I worked in the little time I had, it wouldn't get bigger. I was right to be scared.

I was put through a veritable theatre bootcamp every day. On top of rehearsals, I had daily intensive voice sessions with an incredible voice coach named Janine Pearson and movement lessons with a brilliant Alexander Technique coach named Kelly McEvenue. The idea was to cram four years of theatre school into six weeks, so that I, who had never been in a play before, could take on the task of being the lead in a play at North America's largest classical repertory company, in front of twelve hundred people, sometimes twice a day, playing a part that had more onstage time than Hamlet. (During a dress rehearsal one day, Douglas Rain commented: "My god, you *never* leave the stage! Even Hamlet gets to leave the stage every now and then.")

In the evenings I would try to memorize my lines, something that had terrified me even when I was working in television, where there was at least a possibility of doing a scene over again if you forgot a line. Now, after rehearsals, and when I was done with my schoolwork for the day, I needed to learn a two-hour play. Perfectly. After each line-learning session alone in my bedroom, I felt dizzy with fear.

In the rehearsal hall, though, I was never alone. From Janine I learned how to stretch, how to breathe deep down into my diaphragm, to use it to make a sound that would reach from my deepest self to the back of the enormous theatre and pitch up towards the large balcony. I was to be aware of the back of this balcony with every word. I was to pay as much attention to the final consonant of a word as I did to the

beginning. In everyday speech, Janine explained to me, people often trailed off towards the end of a word, swallowing its final sound. Onstage I was to treat this last consonant as if it had another, final sound to reach for, or as though the word might continue on after it would normally end. I worked hard on this particular point, as my tendency in rehearsal was to let those last sounds float off as I did in regular speech. Janine was rigorous, demanding, and exceedingly warm and kind. By the end of our sessions I had discovered a voice more powerful than I could have ever imagined having. I didn't lose my consonants anymore to a lack of effort at the ends of words. I didn't give up on words before they were completely said.

But the time I had simply wasn't enough to make up for a lack of theatre school, and by the time the dress rehearsals rolled around, Marti and the stage manager had reluctantly decided to mic me. I felt this as an acute failure of my work ethic, and I felt as though I had been given up on. And in that first moment of a mic being hidden in my hair, I gave up a little on myself.

In my movement classes, Kelly taught me how to walk, how to stand, how to make my body alive and present at all times. When my back was to the audience, I was to imagine that I was at a party and a boy I really liked was behind me. Though I was facing away from this imagined boy, my body's energy and its language was all directed to and for him. It was a helpful image and one that my teenage self immediately connected with. But no matter how hard I worked at it, I couldn't straighten my twisted, hunched body. Kelly would massage the muscles that had become increasingly squeezed and trapped in the small space between my upper spine (which had migrated even farther to the right) and my right shoulder blade. She taught me how to hoist myself straight more efficiently, and with less pain, to create the impression of balance. But I was crooked, there was no doubt. The costume department sewed pads into all the places my body was asymmetrical. They filled in the area between my shoulder and chest where there was a gap

due to the increasing hunch on one side. They created a shoulder blade pad for my left shoulder to compensate for the one on the right that protruded. Another large pad ran alongside my left rib cage to even it out with the right one. And then, of course, there was the tight tensor bandage that bound my breasts to make me look like a prepubescent girl.

It felt strange that these breasts, which had become such currency in my life now that I was a sexual person, were being obliterated every time I put on my Alice costume. After straining to grow up and past my childhood for so long, I was now actively disappearing the maturity I had gained through much struggle. This felt strangely in continuity with my childlike life at my aunt and cousin's house. Instead of being a woman, living on my own, which is how I had been living far too early, I was no longer an adult but completely taken care of, with no expectations around the house or responsibilities, being forced back into the body of a child.

By this point, it may be obvious that a nervous breakdown of epic proportions was in the offing. This dichotomy between my womanly body, which was in a kind of collapse, and the oddness of experiencing a sort of reversal of puberty and hard-won independence, twisted with the knots of a story written by a likely pedophile that contained echoes of my relationship with my father, was a powder keg for my subconscious.

It wasn't at all clear to me, though. In fact, I loved the rehearsals. I loved watching the play slowly take shape, the opportunity for play, for experimentation, and the room to try something and have it not work without its inducing panic, which was almost always the case on the TV shows and films I had worked on, which were constantly behind schedule, over budget, and under the gun. The work of theatre seemed like intellectual, creative work, whereas almost everything else I had performed in seemed industrial or about producing a product as quickly as possible. It had often been about finding the *fastest* way to a result instead of the *best* way. And, most surprisingly, theatre was *fun*. I wasn't used to work being fun. But theatre people, it turned out, had reinvented fun.

The people I was working with were a wildly smart, vibrant cast of characters with far more integrity and intellect than their TV and film cousins. They were there because they loved Shakespeare and great text. They were there after studying great works of literature for years. I encountered none of the egos I was used to in film and television, where one narcissistic personality or unstable thespian could hold up a day and harpoon a schedule. There were crazy, larger-than-life characters, to be sure, but they were people who did the damn work, expressed themselves fully, and took up space in a way that I found mesmerizing as opposed to alienating. I shared a dressing room with Michelle Fisk, who played the Red Queen. She was electric; she owned the stage with her huge voice and commanding presence; she was achingly maternal, kind, and forcefully on my side from the first day.

Every now and then, I would try to sneak into the rehearsals a little bit of who I felt the real Alice Liddell to be. I tried to be snappish and judgmental with Douglas Rain's Humpty Dumpty, allowing a kind of provoking flirtatiousness to seep into my performance. I saw Douglas clock this, and saw a small, perplexed smile grow in his eyes as he peered at me sidelong from his giant egg costume. I was quickly directed into a much more innocent exchange, letting him play the salty while I played the sweet.

The White Knight, who Alice meets towards the end of the book, is clearly based on Dodgson himself, a bumbling, incompetent eccentric who so wants Alice to be okay and ultimately helps her to find the final square of the chess game, where she will turn from a pawn into a Queen, thus abandoning him. In these scenes, with Tom Wood playing the White Knight, I played a peculiar concoction of love and scorn. These dynamics were familiar to me. I had spent a life on film sets, my puberty unfolding in front of dozens of men with no sense (or care) of what was appropriate to say or not say in front of children or of the boundaries between adulthood and childhood. The size of my breasts had been commented on, often, through the years. I had experienced unhidden

yearning from people three times my age. I had heard explicit conversations about sex or had had them directed straight at me. I dealt with all this by wielding the only power I had, which at the time felt very real and potent: I could mock these men to their faces, I could say whatever I wanted, I could be as mean and bad and hurtful as I pleased. Because we both knew that, as a child who had felt their desire, I had something on them.

After sneaking these strange, unearthed elements into the scenes with Humpty Dumpty and the White Knight, I was told to be nicer. When I responded, nervously and gently, that I didn't think the real Alice had been particularly "nice," I was told, once again, that this was a play "to delight children," and that while there may have been some troubling undertones in the relationship between Dodgson and Liddell in real life, this play was to be presented as something to bring magic to the audience, not uncomfortable questions of sexuality and pedophilia. I again felt that clang of dissonance between what I was being asked to play and what I understood the play to be, but I quickly pushed it aside, involved myself in the easy, joyful company of the cast, and closed my eyes when it felt, at my next costume fitting, as though my breasts were being bound just a little bit tighter.

In the evenings, I'd do schoolwork to keep up with my classes and study my lines again. Every time I sat down to run my lines on my own, I had a kind of sinking feeling. Away from the loud camaraderie of the big, colourful cast and my supportive coaches, I would realize that *I alone* was Alice. I had to carry this play. I had to remember *all of these lines at the same time*. There would be no second takes once we went into the run of the play. But before I could panic for long, morning would come and the games would begin again, along with the intensive training from Janine and Kelly and the support, care, and nurturing of Marti.

As evening came again, I would remember that I still hadn't taken on the true challenge of being in front of an audience. I tried not to think

about how different it would feel when the seats in the theatre were no longer empty.

On the day of the first preview, I had a little round mint in my mouth that I had taken out of a bowl in the green room. I chewed through the remainder of it anxiously as I waited behind the curtain for the house lights to go down. Tom Wood came up to me and whispered, "Break a leg." I turned to him and said, "I just hope I don't suck." He laughed. I went onstage in the dark. I took my place in an armchair, a fake little kitten in my hands, in front of the mantelpiece that held the huge, ominous looking glass that I was to go through for the next two hours. The preview went mercifully well. I was full of adrenalin and it felt like flying, to be at the centre of something so momentous.

The success of the first show left me with some rather rigid superstitions. I made sure to always have one of those same mints in my mouth and to be almost finished chewing it by the time the lights went down. I asked Tom to come up to me before every show and say "Break a leg" just as the lights finished dimming. I would say, in the exact same tone of voice I had before the first preview, "I just hope I don't suck." I would ask him to laugh in exactly the same way. He sweetly obliged. And then I would, night after night, slip into the armchair in front of the mantelpiece under the cover of the darkness, able, for those few seconds before the stage lights came up on me, to see the anticipation and excitement in the audience's eyes, many of whom were children, there to be delighted.

When previews began, a sign-in sheet was posted near the door of the backstage area. There was a list of the cast, and beside each name there was a blank space for us to initial when we arrived at the theatre, so that the stage manager would know we were there before the performance started. I began to notice that the box next to Douglas Rain's name was always empty. I asked Michelle about it, and she said something to the effect of "That's his thing. He just doesn't sign in." I knocked on Douglas's door. By now, Douglas and I had a rapport that had turned

into something of a sideshow, I as the provoking, irritating teenager, he as the cranky old man who suffered no fools and wasn't used to being trifled with. "Douglas," I said, "why don't you sign in? *Do you think you're so good but you're not?*"

"That's not even a real question." He continued putting on his Humpty Dumpty makeup and asked me to leave.

"Why don't you sign in? What's your problem?"

"I'm a professional," he hissed. "Of course I am here when I am supposed to be here. I don't need to *sign in* to do my job."

I rolled my eyes. From that day onward I signed in for Douglas with cheery, jocular messages to the rest of the cast. One day I wrote, "OH MY GOD! I just LOVE you all SO MUCH! HAPPY HAPPY JOY JOY!" Some days I would write things to the effect of "Do you, like, LOVE your job? I do!!! Have an amazing show, everyone! I appreciate you so much!" I would punctuate the comments with drawings of rainbows and happy faces and smiling suns.

More than one cast member advised me that this was not a good idea and that I did not want to provoke Douglas's fury. Indeed, I had seen his genuine rages before. Mervyn Blake, who was playing the part of the Red King, was well into his eighties and had been part of the Stratford Festival when it was still operating out of a tent in the 1950s. He was frail by now, walking with difficulty with a cane. He had been in an army regiment that had liberated Bergen-Belsen and had sustained considerable trauma that sometimes came up in his sleep. (Someone who had roomed with him on tour told me he would often wake up screaming.) He was warm, always smiling, and universally loved. He was also the first Stratford actor to appear in every one of Shakespeare's plays. One day, in dress rehearsals for the Humpty Dumpty scene, as Douglas was perched with his ridiculous egg head and tiny prop legs on

a fence, Mervyn took a moment to watch the rehearsal, delighted, from the wings. When he let out an appreciative laugh, Douglas *exploded*. He screamed that it was unprofessional, distracting, and amateurish for Mervyn to be standing there watching while we were rehearsing. At some point he stopped addressing the shocked old man directly and started screaming at Marti, "*HE SHOULD KNOW BETTER BY NOW!*" It was terrifying, and I felt my heart crumble for Mervyn, who stood stunned and alone in the wings. The warnings to be careful of Douglas were not unmerited. I just couldn't help myself.

One day I arrived to see Douglas staring at the sign-in sheet, reading all of my entries in his column and smiling to himself. By the time he got to the end of the preceding week's sign-ins he was shaking with laughter. He turned around and saw me, and his face turned to steel. But I felt, in that moment, that in a far-removed and utterly unselfish way, he appreciated me. My body went weightless with the sensation of victory.

Opening night arrived. My dad, my siblings, my mother's sister and her husband, and many of my cousins had come into town for the big opening. I stood backstage. I sucked on my mint. I told Tom I "hope I don't suck" after he said "Break a leg." He laughed. I made my way in the dark to the armchair. I felt as though I might throw up. My voice, when I started to speak, was shaking. It wasn't just shaking inside me; it was shaking on the outside too. I couldn't control it. I was terrified. A wall of fog rose up as I went through the looking glass, and then the set piece of the mantel and giant mirror were wheeled away by the company members. I had a conversation with a gnat. And then I heard my father, somewhere towards the back left-hand side of the theatre, cough. Something about that cough made everything settle. I was onstage. I was the lead. I was Alice. I was acting with the voice of the great Douglas Rain, who was voicing said gnat. I was going to be just fine. I felt a sudden joy at being there, the thrill of making people laugh or gasp in real time. The thrill of delighting children. I never wanted to be anywhere else.

Towards the end of the play, Alice meets the White Knight. His first words to her, after doing battle with the Red Knight over who will lay claim to her, are, "It was a glorious victory, wasn't it?"

Alice replies, "I don't know. I don't want to be anybody's prisoner. I want to be a Queen."

The White Knight says, "So you will, when you've crossed the next brook. I'll see you safe to the end of the wood—and then I must go back, you know. That's the end of my move."

The White Knight is bumbling, nervous, unable to really manage in any reasonable way in the world. He shows Alice a little box he keeps "clothes and sandwiches in," which he carries upside down "so that the rain can't get in." He hasn't realized that he has left the box open, which means he is losing everything he has as it falls out. He tells Alice about absurd, nonsensical inventions that have no practical purpose, like anklets around his horse's feet to "guard against the bites of sharks." The character was played by Tom Wood, my pre-show bringer of good luck. He was almost painfully gentle and sweet to me. When I met him, out on that stage in that scene, it signalled the play was almost at its end. He sauntered up to me, with an actor playing his horse close behind him.

In Lewis Carroll's original scene from the book, which was nearly identical to the scene we played, he writes:

Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday—the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight—the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her—the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet—and the black shadows of the forest behind—all this she took in like a picture . . .

I heard my dad cough again, deep in the middle rows somewhere. I looked out into the black chasm of the hidden audience. I looked back at Tom, singing.

As the Knight sang the last words of the ballad, he gathered up the reins, and turned his horse's head along the road by which they had come. "You've only a few yards to go," he said, "down the hill and over that little brook, and then you'll be a Queen— But you'll stay and see me off first?" he added as Alice turned with an eager look in the direction to which he pointed. "I shan't be long. You'll wait and wave your handkerchief when I get to that turn in the road! I think it'll encourage me, you see."

"Of course I'll wait," said Alice: "and thank you very much for coming so far—and for the song—I liked it very much."

"I hope so," the Knight said doubtfully: "but you didn't cry so much as I thought you would."

I felt myself on the verge of a sob. Some deep sadness at having to say goodbye to the kind, messy, vulnerable, incompetent, loving White Knight gushed up. In rehearsals, James Reaney had told us that the White Knight was Charles Dodgson saying goodbye to the Alice he had known and loved, as she had fled into adulthood. And this moment he had written was Alice giving him the send-off, a goodbye full of gratitude, which she likely had never given him in life. A small, guttural moan escaped from me, which I quickly suppressed. I saw an assistant stage manager turn quickly from the wings to see what had happened. I took a deep breath and continued.

"I hope it encouraged him," she said, as she turned to run down the hill: "and now for the last brook, and to be a Queen! How grand it sounds!"

After the show I rode back to my aunt's house with my father and siblings. My father talked about how mesmerizing the play was, how

brilliant I was. My sister Jo said, "I disagree. It sort of played like an innocent, sweet tale. But I don't think that's what it is. The books are more complex than that. And Alice seemed so *sweet*. I don't think that's who Alice is. Alice is smart and provoking and bratty. That's how I always thought it should be played." I felt sick. I felt I might vomit. I opened the window. She was right, of course.

I had sixty-five shows to go. And now I feared that for the many months of shows to go, I would not be able to hide the lie of my performance from myself.

I managed to push this criticism out of my conscious mind, but the dissonance I had felt throughout rehearsals had now been clearly articulated. It was a discomfort I could no longer rid myself of by avoiding thinking about it. A seed had been planted that would grow.

Despite this clash between belief and performance that I now felt while performing the play, my life for those first twenty shows feels like a dream to me now, a picture of overindulged childhood and creative excitement. By day, there were the long hours of delicious food and reading great books with two vibrant, maternal women. By night, I was performing with some of the greatest actors I have ever known, ending with a standing ovation after every performance. It was thrilling. Until it wasn't.

Around the twentieth show, I began to tune out. I still loved the time with my aunt and my cousin, but it was at strange odds with the life I was building outside of this pause in time. I was in love with, and separated from, Corey. He was allowed to visit, but not to share a bedroom. Corey was not within my aunt's small collection of treasures. (To be fair, he was hard-edged and cynical and lacked any diplomacy.) I could feel that she disliked both his presence in her house and what he symbolized: that I would be moving out one day. My aunt said, somewhat wryly as she set up the guest bedroom for Corey, that she didn't want any "copulation" in the house because her granddaughter looked up

to me. I was being loved and pampered and nurtured like a child, but I also had some of the limitations of a child, and though these limitations now seem reasonable to me, being a child wasn't something I was used to, either then or during most of my childhood. A part of me was homesick for myself—the self that felt much older than fifteen, the self that lived free from rules and restrictions and the other taxes of being taken care of, the self that I felt I had earned, fair and square, through years of adult responsibilities.

And the show itself was now boring to me. I was on a kind of automatic pilot, for the most part thinking of other things while saying the lines I had said so many dozens of times before. I felt no fear, but neither did I feel much joy or engagement. My main joy in the production now came from the practical jokes the cast played on each other, the sudden glimpse of someone naked in the wings as I delivered lines and had to keep my face straight. The play now performed itself, without much effort. I wasn't really there, consciously, for much of it.

I've always wondered what my performance looked and felt like to an audience during those second twenty shows. Did I seem disassociated? Or was my performance of Alice, as it had been guided, so separated from anything real in me anyway that there wasn't much of a difference from the shows when I had been more consciously present? What I do know is this: not being conscious of myself in those twenty or so "automatic pilot" shows had consequences.

On my days off, I took the train to Toronto to see Corey. We had a place together in the Gay Village, a sixth-floor boxy apartment with little light in a 1960s high-rise. It had no furniture. We would sleep on the floor together, our possessions limited to two little candle holders with cut-outs in them that cast stars on the ceiling as we lay together in sleeping bags. We also had a goblet with grasshoppers carved into it,

given to me by the legendary actor Bill Needles, who had told me he thought Corey was "adorable." He told me that he had had this grasshopper glass in every house he had lived in as an adult and it had brought him good luck. "It's time to pass it along to someone who needs it," he had said.

One day, when I returned to Stratford from a night in Toronto, the stage manager asked to speak with me before the show. As I went to my dressing room, I noticed several of the cast looking at me sympathetically. I started to have the sense that I was about to be told something unpleasant, something that everyone else already knew.

Marylu, the stage manager, asked me if I knew that for the past few shows I had been adding a vowel to the end of nearly every word. I said no, but that Janine had told me to imagine there was a vowel at the end of every word. Marylu emphasized that I wasn't just imagining these vowels anymore. I was actually *saying* them. I was shocked. As I felt my body burn into what felt like a dangerous heat, I thanked her for informing me (though I secretly wanted to kill her for doing so) and said that I would stop doing it.

The next show, I was not on automatic pilot anymore. I heard every word everyone said. I heard every word *I* said. And every word that should have ended in a consonant had a vowel tacked right onto the end of it, like a wagging, gleeful tail. I could hear myself now, clearly, but I couldn't change what I heard.

(My one-and-a-half-year-old, who at this moment is learning to speak, does the exact same thing. She says "hot-a" instead of "hot." She says "mad-a!" instead of "mad." Everyone finds it hilarious. Sometimes I do too. Often, though, I find it makes my heart skip a beat. Because the night I first heard myself speaking this way was the beginning of the end of my surviving my previous life.)

I went back to Janine. I worked with her for hours the next day. Now we had to undo much of the work we had done together. I needed to be willing to let the ends of words go again instead of hitting them with the imaginings of a continuation. I just had to let them bleed out into silence. This act felt irresponsible, like a kind of abandonment of the words—an abandonment of Lewis Carroll's words. It was painful and felt like an arduous process, but after two shows, the phantom vowels had disappeared.

Douglas Rain appeared at my dressing room doorway after I had done my first show with vowel-free word endings. He looked at me with an intensity, almost a ferocity, in his eyes. He said, "I have never seen *anyone* fix such a *major* problem so *quickly*."

As I left the theatre that night, I received squeezes on my shoulders and hugs and congratulations. Until then, I had not realized what a big problem, and what a widely *recognized* problem, it had been. What had the *audiences* thought? It must have been crazy to watch a two-hour play with someone speaking with such a noticeable tic.

One thing felt certain to me. If I went back on automatic pilot, or let my guard down ever again, I would fail. I would fail spectacularly. I now had proof. Horrible, humiliating proof.

THE UNRAVELLING

"Take care of yourself!" screamed the White Queen, seizing Alice's hair with both her hands. "Something's going to happen!"

And then (as Alice afterwards described it) all sorts of things happened in a moment.

—Through the Looking-Glass

The tic in my speech had been resolved, but now a new problem had arisen. This one had teeth and scales, a kind of giant smelly, angry Jabberwock that was bearing down on me.

Now I was afraid of going onstage.

I was afraid in a way that drenched my whole body in sweat in an instant and made my heart smash so violently within my chest that I thought it might explode clear through my skin. I was afraid to go onstage, but I was also afraid of my voice. I was afraid of how my mouth shaped words. And I was afraid that the automatic pilot I had been on for the previous twenty shows had been responsible for getting me through them. I had remembered all my lines on automatic pilot and there had been no problems. Now that the auto mode had been turned off, what if my conscious self couldn't remember them? And what if (and this thought made it hard to breathe) anyone found out that I was afraid to go onstage? What if this fear was known and spoken of by others? I cannot, sitting here, in my forty-one-year-old body and brain, remember what it felt like to be certain that expressing a fear would make it worse, that the humiliation of people knowing I had a fear could be worse than the agony of living with it alone and unexpressed. But at fifteen these things were patently obvious to me and as I was in conversation only with myself on this matter, there was no other way of thinking of this situation within the limited confines of my panicked brain.

Mornings were usually okay. I would wake up and begin the day of reading with my aunt and my cousin, and find myself pleasantly surprised by my general calm. Then, around two thirty, as the day veered closer to evening than morning, some kind of state-of-emergency switch turned on, and the tyranny of seven thirty (as the great Canadian actor Brent Carver called it) loomed over me. I couldn't do it. I knew I couldn't. I couldn't go out on that stage under any circumstances. But I had to. There was no way out. I would go to the theatre, my legs

heavy, feeling like a condemned person walking to the guillotine. I would chide myself for this overly dramatic image, but I was fairly certain that if I had to go onstage that night, I would die. But, I thought, I would die more *painfully* if I told anyone how I felt and experienced the shame of their knowing I was afraid.

It never even *occurred* to me that I was likely surrounded by people who had experienced stage fright and had, over many years, learned techniques for managing it. In retrospect, I was in a town of people, a significant percentage of whom likely had a lot of expertise in this matter. It pains me now to think of how helpful Michelle Fisk, who played the Red Queen, would have been. She was always incredibly kind to me, and hid her maternal instincts towards me in small gestures of care so as not to make me feel diminished by them. Nonetheless, it never once crossed my mind to tell her, or anyone else, including Auntie Ann and Sarah, who loved me, would have done anything for me, and were resourceful.

I started to arrive at the theatre earlier and earlier. Initially, at the beginning of the run, I would arrive at the theatre early to go into the basement rehearsal space, a dark, carpeted room with no windows, to stretch and do vocal warm-ups. By week two of my stage fright, I was arriving hours early, locking the door and beginning what was now no longer a warm-up but about an hour and a half of sobbing on the floor in a fetal position.

As I waited in the wings for the lights to go down, my before-show rituals with the mint and Tom took on a frantic tone. If he wasn't there by my side to say "Break a leg" earlier than he should be, I would run to the end of the line of actors waiting to go onstage to find him and grab him, my nails digging into his arm, in thinly concealed panic. Now I had two mints, one in my mouth and one already ground down to the appropriate size, to ensure I got the exact sound of the *crunch* I was used to after I said "I just hope I don't suck." The rituals became

more and more critical to my survival, to ensuring that something didn't go terribly wrong, to ensuring I didn't become engulfed forever by the world behind the looking glass.

Now every scene, every set piece, signified to me only how close or far the performance was to being over. The Gnat scene was bad. Almost nothing had happened yet; I was still close to the beginning. Ditto for the White Queen scene and the Tweedledum and Tweedledee scene. It was around the Humpty Dumpty scene that I started to relax a little. As I saw Douglas, perched in his ridiculous giant egg costume, tiny legs dangling off the wall, I knew I was heading into the home stretch. I also felt, every now and then, Douglas's eyes on me, seeming to notice something, projecting some kind of concern or warmth that I hadn't noticed before. I wondered if he could see my fear. I was terrified that he could, but I was able, for those brief moments with me as Alice and he as a grouchy giant egg, to also feel soothed by the possibility of his knowing me.

And then one day, the fear turned to madness, and I myself went through the looking glass. During one performance, as the fog rose in the giant mirror in the first scene of the show and I shimmied down onto the chair on the other side, something more disturbing than stage fright began to grow in me. I started to feel convinced by the nonsense of the world I had entered. When Alice had to run in order to stand still, I felt anxious and resentful of the arbitrary rule I was being forced to follow by the imperious Red Queen. When I asked what road to follow and had a character recite a poem to me instead of giving me a direction, I became genuinely incensed. Not incensed as Alice. Incensed as Sarah. I started to become more and more furious with each passing show. Conversations such as the one where the White Queen claims there is "jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today" made me livid. I didn't like that the answers every character gave me in response to my queries were so infuriatingly twisted and circular.

ALICE: I'm sure I didn't mean—
RED QUEEN: That's just what I complain of! You should *have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning—and a child's more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn't deny that, even if you tried with both hands.*
ALICE: I don't deny things with my hands.
RED QUEEN: Nobody said you did. I said you couldn't if you tried.
WHITE QUEEN: She's in that state of mind that she wants to deny something*—only she doesn't know what to deny!*

I began to feel trapped behind the looking glass, as though the worst imaginings of my smaller self, the one who had resisted these stories at bedtime in the first place, had come true.

"So I wasn't dreaming, after all," she said to herself, "unless—unless we're all part of the same dream. Only I do hope it's my *dream, and not the Red King's! I don't like belonging to another person's dream," she went on in a rather complaining tone: "I've a great mind to go and wake him, and see what happens!"*

—Through the Looking-Glass

As the play progressed, I became more and more lost to the world I knew. It was as though the frustration I had felt when hearing these stories as a small child had suddenly taken a growing pill and had taken over my whole body.

Now, when I said goodbye to the White Knight in that penultimate scene, I could not stop the tears from flooding down my face as I said "*I hope it encouraged him.*" I watched him, losing his things out of the

hole in his sack, as he trotted on alone, unawares. I wished there was something I could do for him. I hated Alice Liddell for abandoning Charles Dodgson by fleeing her childhood into womanhood. I hated that my dad left chicken pot pies on the stovetop for a week, insisting they didn't need to be refrigerated, or that he made the red cabbage three weeks before Christmas dinner, and that the cards he played solitaire with no longer had images on them. I tried to block out the mornings I had woken up to find him, still sleepless, staring at reams of papers on the dining room table, full of tiny, neatly written mathematical equations, numbers doubling and quadrupling until he ran out of space in the millions. (I later discovered he was trying to ascertain how many humans had had to copulate in order to produce him, and how many of those couplings were likely rapes. "How much violence was I the product of?" he said, looking helpless and childlike.) I wonder, in retrospect, if these moments were signs of a typical eccentric Englishman who'd never had to do a single domestic duty until his wife died, or of mental illness, or early signs of the dementia that would be diagnosed many years later. I suppose I'll never know, and there is something I can't help but find funny about how closely these states might resemble each other.

When I had moved out of my father's house the year before I went to Stratford, he didn't argue with me. He didn't suggest that we move closer to my school and my friends so that I might be inclined to stay with him. He just let me leave. It wasn't a lack of love, I don't think, but a habit of being passive, of avoiding conflict, of letting go every day in a way that still provokes both admiration and fury in me. And once I left, we didn't speak unless I called him. He never said "I love you" when he said goodbye. So I started to say it to him. I said it insistently, consistently, until one day he had learned how to say it back to me. I already knew that he loved me, but it could be vague and hard to pin down. His love was all around the edges, but sometimes it was hard for both of us to see, I think.

On a visit home one weekend shortly after I had moved out, I found a half-written letter to his sister Janet in England. He wrote that a mammal's purpose in life was to bear and raise their young. Now that I was gone, his life had no purpose. He'd thought he would have a few more years left of purpose. But I had left so young. He wrote this in a detached, intellectual way that implied it was a subject of some interest but not heartbreak. I later found a reply from his sister in which she attempted to comfort him, saying, "I'm sure your Sarah will change her mind and come back to you soon." But I never did.

Around this time, my dad, when I would see him occasionally, would sing to himself, with a little side grin, "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?"

Standing on that stage, convinced I had gone through the looking glass, I knew I didn't want to be a Queen. I didn't want to wave goodbye to him. I was moving away from my childhood, but I was also strangely caught and bound to it for this one, endless moment, in which I had to perform and remember all the words. And not add vowels to the ends of the words.

I cried every time I said goodbye to the White Knight. I cry now as I imagine the farewell. It guts me to remember comforting this bumbling fool of a sweetheart as he must leave behind the child that loved him—and that he loved.

Somewhere around this time I was given a note by stage management saying that while I could play a note of sadness in saying goodbye to the White Knight, I needed to stop short of turning it into a tragedy. I tried to tone down the sadness. But I couldn't. I still can't.

Recently, when I described this moment in the play to my therapist and the scenes of Dodgson's rejection by Alice in *Dreamchild*, I tried hard

to talk about my anger at being made to feel sad for the grown man instead of for the child, but all that came out of me was the sadness itself, a sadness so fierce I couldn't speak for my sobbing. My therapist said, quietly, "There is something tremendously sad about being a pedophile. To love a creature you can't have. To know that that love is bad. To know that you are bad for having these feelings, even if you don't act on them. It's tremendously sad."

When, at the end of the play, there is a large dinner party that descends into chaos and confusion (there is an argument with an angry pudding, candles shoot to the ceiling, Alice ends up sitting beside a leg of mutton instead of the White Queen) and Alice finally destroys the looking-glass world by ripping off the tablecloth in a fit of rage, the rage in me was real. "I CAN'T STAND THIS ANY LONGER!" Alice screams. I often had tears flying out of my face when I screamed this line. I often caught Douglas's eyes at the end of the table and saw in them a flash of recognition of the real snapping inside of me.

It wasn't just the play itself that started to drive me mad. So did the audience, the sea of faceless strangers who sat quietly together in the dark, unseen and safe with their rustling programs and snapping gum and glugs of water, while I inwardly collapsed every night in front of them. When the lights were down between set pieces, or between acts, I would study their impartial faces as they reached into their purses for lip gloss or studied their programs. What kind of monsters would purchase tickets and bring their children to come to see me fail? Couldn't they see I was a child? (Though certain of being an adult, I invoked the state of childhood as a weapon against anything that struck me as unjust.) What kind of perversity in people leads them to pay money to watch someone so young walk a tightrope they will surely fall off? I thought to myself. I resented them all.

One day, around this time, Douglas Rain appeared again at my dressing room door. I heard Michelle, beside me, give a little start. He had a

tomato in his hand. He held it out towards me. He said, "Here. I grew it in my garden."

I laughed. "A tomato?"

"I have more," he said. "You could cook something with them."

I laughed again and went into the jocular, needling mode I always had in interaction with him. "Cooking is boring," I said.

"Do you know what cooking *is*?" he hissed, enunciating every sound. "It is taking something ordinary, like this tomato, and by adding—*what?*—it becomes something *extraordinary*."

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

"I said by *adding what* does it become extraordinary?"

"Heat," I said.

"Correct," he said.

He put the tomato on the counter and looked at me for a moment longer than usual, as though trying to assess what was going on behind my eyes. I looked away. If anyone was going to discover the secret of my terror, it was him.

When I got to the end of each of these jagged shows, I felt a kind of elation and adrenalin I have not felt before or since. I would wait behind the theatre, beside the loading dock where set pieces were wheeled in and out, for my aunt or cousin to pick me up. I would get into the car, covered in sweat and relief, and my breathing would be calm until around two thirty the next afternoon, when it would all begin again.

But the panic of two thirty started to become one thirty, which started to become twelve thirty. The starting gun for my terror seemed to go off earlier with each passing day. I kept telling myself, "Only twenty-five more shows to go," "Only twenty-four more shows to go," counting down the days until my release from the prison of my fear. And then came the news, greeted with elation by a cast of actors who made the majority of their income only in the summers, that the play had been picked up for a winter run at the Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto. When I heard the news, I felt nauseous. I forced a shaky smile onto my face. In our dressing room, Michelle expressed her relief at knowing income was coming in over the winter. She had two small children, Katie and Max. She said, "I can finally get Katie a carpet for her room. Her floor is so cold, and she keeps asking for a carpet. I can finally get one for her." She had tears in her eyes. So did I. It was such a simple thing for a child to want, this carpet.

My counting down of the shows no longer worked, now that so many more had just been added. I woke up scared, I went to bed scared. My heart raced all the time. Now, before I went onstage, I would bargain with myself like a scam artist. I would say, in a whisper, after I had crunched that mint, "I promise you, Sarah, I *promise you* that if you get through this one show, just this one show, I will never, ever make you do this again. I promise. If you can get to the end of this show, I won't ever make you do another one. You will never have to go onstage again for the rest of your life." But it was a lie. There was always another show. And another one. And somewhere along the way I kicked the liar that was conning me into these false bargains in the face. Betrayed by the bad deals handed to me by my broken self, I knew I had to find another way out.

In the midst of this mental state, which I believe was madness, the only thing that made obvious sense to me was to trade one terror for another. To get out of this fear, I needed to be split in two; I needed to have the surgery.

"I can't stand this any longer!"

—Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*

I had lunch with Marti Maraden at her house to discuss the run at the Winter Garden. I watched her doing the dishes after lunch as I tried to figure out what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Suddenly I blurted out, "I'm in terrible pain. My back hurts all the time. I don't know how I'll be able to keep going with another run when this one is over. I think I need surgery." She was quiet and still for a while. She studied me closely. I watched as she skillfully turned off her director self and made room for the warm, maternal nurturer that she also was. It wasn't a strategy, or false; it was a decision to reorient her priorities, with no warning, in that precise moment. I was a child, and she saw me as one. I told her that I needed to go to see a doctor as soon as possible, because I could hardly get through the days. She encouraged me to see an orthopaedic surgeon.

The next week I got on the train to Toronto, with a plan to finally get myself free. I went to a respected doctor I hadn't seen before, Douglas Hedden at the Hospital for Sick Children. Dr. Hedden, a kind, soft-spoken, gentle man, took me into his office after examining me. We looked at my X-rays together. He said that it was clear that the curve of my spine, which was now more than sixty degrees, needed surgery. I felt a wave of relief. The thing I had spent the last four years dreading was now my ticket to freedom. The surgery wasn't urgent, he said. It could be done early the next year if necessary. I quickly told Dr. Hedden that I was in unimaginable pain, that it couldn't wait that long. My back hurt all the time. I could barely walk. I was in the middle of a play right now, and I couldn't do another show. *I couldn't do one more show.* It just simply hurt too much. Dr. Hedden took a long time before he spoke. He looked down and quietly told me that scoliosis sometimes caused muscle spasms but it didn't normally cause terrible pain. When it got as severe as the case I had, it could eventually have a calamitous effect on other organs.

Lungs could become compressed, et cetera. But usually the curve of the spine itself wasn't so painful. After another long pause he said, "You know, I once had a patient who had scoliosis and he played baseball. And he really, really needed to stop playing baseball. He said he was in a lot of pain. That may have been true. But what was definitely true was that he really, really needed to stop playing baseball. Do you know what I mean? He just had to. And so I wrote him a note saying he couldn't play baseball anymore. Would you like a note like that?"

I looked down, embarrassed, and grateful. I nodded. "Yes. I would like a note like that."

"And," he said, looking at his schedule, "we can do the surgery this year. The soonest we can do it is November. But I'll write a note that says you need to stop acting in the play immediately."

I could barely get the words out to thank him.

I don't remember what the note said. It wasn't a lie. It was beautifully constructed. It said what I needed it to say but it didn't say anything that was false. I'm not sure I've ever felt gratitude as piercing and transformative as I did when I held his note in my hand on that train. I took that note back to Stratford with me and it made me free.

(There was a follow-up meeting with my father to get his consent for the surgery. Recently, when I made contact with Dr. Hedden again, he reminded me of this meeting, which I had forgotten. He wrote: "I must admit there is one moment that I think about from time to time. It was when we were discussing the surgery and going through the risks and benefits. I asked your father what he thought and his answer was something like, 'well it's her decision, seems like she has been making her own decisions all along.' It spoke to the empowerment of children and trusting them to make good decisions [well most of the time]." I was happy to be reminded of this, and to

hear his perspective on the freedom my father afforded me, despite all its obvious pitfalls.)

I did one final agonizing show, showed the doctor's note to stage management and Marti, and left my panicked understudy, Christina, to pick up the pieces of the mammoth part in one and a half arduous days of rehearsals.

For the next week or so, I feigned being in enormous pain. My cousin Sarah insists to this day that there was real pain in there as well, and it's possible that there was, but I couldn't believe my own body because I knew how desperate I was to further my more important agenda of getting myself free of the play. My aunt, thinking I had simply become bored and wanted to go back to Toronto to live with Corey, as I had offered no other excuse other than my sudden onset of pain, seemed upset with me, barely making eye contact with me in those last days. There had been a future in which I stayed living with her and Sarah and they would take care of me, and our summers of reading and laughing would go on and on. They had floated this idea, more than once, during the happier days of rehearsals, when all I wanted to do was continue to work in theatre and stay with them, coddled and taken care of forever. Now this possible future was dying around us, and I felt, for a time, not only that my Auntie Ann didn't believe my pain but that I had been cast out of her small collection of treasured things. Sarah came to my bedroom every day to put bags of frozen peas on my back and sit silently with me. I could sense that she knew something else was going on, but I could feel that she was also aware that something in me needed to be tended to, even if it wasn't the thing I was pointing to, and she nurtured me anyway. It made me feel lucky, loved, and unbearably guilty.

With the news that I couldn't continue the show and was due to have surgery in November, the run at the Winter Garden was cancelled. I won an award of $500 for best newcomer to the Stratford Festival.

I made sure I wasn't in town during the ceremony, and when I got the award money, I cashed the cheque and left the money in an envelope in Michelle's dressing room with the words "For Katie's carpet" on it. I couldn't look anyone in the eye. I had cost them their winter income. The run at Stratford continued, with my understudy performing the remaining ten shows. Without even realizing it, I had made it through fifty-eight of sixty-eight shows.

Marti and the stage manager asked if I could come and watch with them in the stage manager's booth to celebrate the final show. How strange it was to suddenly see the show from the outside, to see the fabulous spectacle of it, to see how innocuous it was, instead of witnessing it from deep inside a nightmare. It truly was a delight to children.

After the curtain came down, I walked backstage with feigned difficulty. Douglas Rain, who usually disappeared as soon as the show was over, was there, waiting for me in the wings. He stretched his arms out wide, tears falling down his face, and hugged me hard and long.

This sudden dissolving of his armour in the face of the only disingenuous moment I had had with him crushed whatever was left of me. Years later, I wonder if he knew exactly what was going on. I wonder if that hug was for the hidden story that no one else would hear for many years.

About a week before the surgery was to take place, I was sent for a battery of tests at the hospital as part of my pre-op protocol. The curve in my spine was now more than sixty degrees. I was told that my lung function was significantly compromised by the scoliosis. I felt instant relief at this finding. It hadn't been due to a lack of work ethic, or a moral failing, or a failure of talent that I had needed that mic to be heard in the balconies. As it turned out, my lungs and diaphragm, constrained as they were by my twisted body, simply couldn't make sound travel that far. As I sat with Dr. Hedden that day, with an X-ray of my deformed spine lit up behind him on a light board, I began to feel the

real fear of the surgery that had been obliterated by my fear of the stage and the pressing necessity to use the operation as an escape hatch. I trembled in my seat as he told me what to expect and what to prepare for the following Thursday. The surgery would take ten hours. I would be in the hospital for over two weeks. I would be unable to participate in regular life for months. He also told me the risks, which, though uncommon, included paralysis.

As I was about to leave, I turned back to him and asked if he had ever had a patient become paralyzed or die from the surgery. He looked me steadily in the eye and told me that he had performed this surgery every Thursday for years, and that he had never had that happen to one of his patients. He took a pause and said, "And I can tell you that if either of those things happened, it would change my life, too." I knew that he meant it, and I felt certain that I was safe in his hands. Years later, when I spoke to Dr. Hedden again, I reminded him of his words to me that day and told him how much they had meant to me. He said that he remembered the conversation. Just months before, a colleague of his had had a terrible outcome with a patient in an OR. He said, "I was speaking the truth. I had seen how it could destroy a doctor."

A few days before the operation I had a dream that my long blond hair had been sewn into my back during the surgery, and that when I awoke in the hospital I couldn't move my head forward with the hair stuck in my back. My face was pointed permanently skyward. The very next day I walked into a hairdresser's, and got a pixie cut.

The hospital wouldn't let Corey stay overnight with me. I was fifteen, and as I was a minor, only immediate family were allowed. This was horrifying to me, as Corey *was* my family as I defined it. He was who I lived with now and the person I loved. He was the person who now took care of me. The idea of him not being allowed to be present was terrifying to me. After much negotiation I got clearance for him to be in the recovery room. For some reason, it was my greatest fear that

he wouldn't be there when I woke up from the surgery. I became obsessed with this one detail; I perseverated on it. I was terrified that my dad would be there when I woke up and would be unable to hear me due to his impaired hearing and his general lack of attunement.

On the day of the surgery, as I was wheeled into the OR, a young anaesthesiology resident stayed by my side, talking to me, connected and kind. I remember a gruff old anesthesiologist suddenly appearing and yelling at a nurse about my IV or something being wrong. I remember him shoving a mask over my face without telling me he was going to do so. I remember panicking and screaming, "This is all a lie! I don't need this surgery! I lied!"

And then I remember darkness. And I remember a tiny pinprick of light pulsating at the end of that darkness. I remember counting in the dark, unable to hear or feel or see as I counted, far into the thousands, and watched that beating prick of light. I remember having the thought: "This is what people see when they die. That is the tunnel with the white light."

During the surgery, I was later told, I had an episode of very severe bronchospasm, possibly an allergic reaction to something in the humidifier placed in my breathing circuit. They had to stop the surgery for an hour. They had to go out and tell my dad and my aunt in the waiting room that they had stopped the surgery and that I was having a severe episode. My dad told me later that he had been so upset he had vomited. He thought, from the gravity with which they shared this information, that I was going to die.

When I woke up after the ten-hour surgery, Corey was not there. They couldn't find him. (He had fallen asleep in another part of the hospital, terrified and exhausted after arguing repeatedly with nurses who had not been given the information that he had permission to see me.) When I opened my eyes to the blur of the recovery room, grey, full of beeping

machines, nurses passing in front of my vision, my dad was there. I told him I was thirsty. I told him I was sad that Corey wasn't there. He understood every word I said. Even in my haze, I was astonished by his ability to hear me so clearly when he needed to.

The nurse pointed out a morphine pump that was in my hand. She told me that I could press the button anytime I felt too much pain and I would get more morphine in my IV. It was shaped like a cylinder, and hollow in the centre. Instinctually I placed the hollow part on the protrusion of my rib under my chest, thinking it would hold the pump upright if I could place it exactly right. It fell over immediately, rolled a bit, and then came to a stop, in a straight line. There was no protrusion anymore. The rib had moved. That part of my body was now level, even. I was in a different body now. I felt myself smile, and then I fell asleep.

Later, when I had been moved to a ward room, Dr. Hedden came in to see how I was doing. I told him I felt I had been conscious for the whole surgery, locked in my body, unable to feel any sensation or hear or see, but I had been counting the whole time. He smiled. He told me I had woken up earlier than patients usually do. I had still been in the OR when I started speaking. They had been discussing *Road to Avonlea*, the show I was in as a child, while they washed up after the surgery. I had suddenly said, in a clear voice, "Don't watch it. It's a shitty show." I had given them a start, he said. (I remembered his face, looking a bit alarmed, appearing over mine, comforting me, talking me back to sleep as the gurney was moved out of the OR to the recovery room. I could feel every bump of the floor in my brand-new spine, my torn-apart-and-put-back-together-again body.)

My Auntie Ann stayed with me in the hospital for two weeks, sleeping on the small couch by my bedside. Every half an hour or so, throughout the night, I'd ask her to change the position of the hospital bed, to alter the place of pressure on my spine. After five days of this she went to stay at her son's house to get a few hours' uninterrupted sleep,

leaving my siblings to watch me in shifts, but I called her and begged her to come back. The morphine was wearing off, I was going into withdrawal, and the strain of vomiting felt as though it was ripping the stitches in my back. She roused herself from her only unbroken sleep in many days to come back and be by my side.

Twelve years later, as she lay dying of cancer, I visited her in the hospital and reminded her of this time, and commented on how exhausted she must have been, staying there day and night with me and knowing I couldn't let her go for even a short break. She said, smiling, with tears in her eyes, "I told you I would never leave you." I didn't know anyone could have meant this so literally. (Her daughters did the same for her in those last months of her life. She was rarely alone, and the perfectionist-level care they gave her was full of insight, creativity, calm, and intelligence. It is a learned art, this virtuoso caregiving, and she had taught it masterfully.)

When I got back to the apartment Corey and I shared, he had decorated it for Christmas; there were red-and-green plaid flannel sheets on the bed, and a small blinking Christmas tree stood in a corner of the bedroom. My cousin Sarah stayed with us for a few days, cooking and cleaning and caring for me.

For the first few weeks, a nurse came in a couple of times a week to help me shower. Then, towards the end of December, my dad picked us up to go to his house in Aurora for Christmas. I lay in the back seat and every bump in the road felt as though it might break apart all the new nuts and bolts in my spine.

With my short haircut and gaunt face after the surgery, I looked eerily like my mother in the final weeks before she died of cancer. My brother Mark told me later he found it hard to look at me, as I looked so like her in the throes of cancer, lying on the couch in the same house she'd suffered in.

In my stocking was a mechanical claw, placed there by Mark, so I could reach things from my lying-down position on the couch, which I remained in for most of the holiday. At the bottom of my stocking I found, wrapped in tissue paper, three miniature figures of Alice, the White Knight, and Humpty Dumpty. I thanked my dad without looking at him and placed them on the mantelpiece, where they remained, collecting dust, for years. My dad also gave me a short black dress. He said, awkwardly, as I held it up, "I thought . . . when you get better. It would look really sexy." Everyone looked away.

And then, when the epic of Christmas was over, Corey and I went home to our strange and quiet life. We were two parentless teenagers, with a major surgery to recover from. I tried to get used to living in my new body, which, among other changes, was now inches taller than it had been when my spine had been crooked. Corey and I had relied on a steady diet of takeout food and Alphagetti up until this point in our lives together. One day, Corey decided to show me *GoodFellas*, his favourite film at the time. As I watched it, he made a tomato sauce, looking up a recipe in *The New Basics Cookbook*, which I had bought that year but never used. I had a kind of Smell-O-Vision experience as I watched the characters make tomato sauce in the film while Corey made the same meal in the next room. This became a ritual. Corey would put on a favourite film and teach himself how to make a dish from the film at the same time. In these long months, when I could hardly move, Corey learned the art of cooking. (He would, in later years, go to chef school, work as a professional cook, and eventually become a restaurant critic and then a food reporter.) I couldn't move without pain for a long time. I read all of Charles Dickens, thought about writing books one day, and fantasized about being mobile enough that I could one day walk down the street to the hardware store to buy a nail. I had no idea what I would do with this nail, but the idea of being strong and mobile and free enough to get there to choose the nail was exhilarating to me.

She went on growing, and growing, and very soon had to kneel down on the floor: in another minute there was not even room for this, and she tried the effect of lying down with one elbow against the door, and the other arm curled round her head. Still she went on growing, and, as a last resource, she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney, and said to herself, "Now I can do no more, whatever happens. What will *become of me?"*

—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The plan was to go back to school when I got better. The plan was to try to get into Oxford. The plan was derailed by the Conservatives in Ontario winning the provincial election in 1995. When I could finally walk and resume a life, the one I walked into looked nothing like the one I had been heading towards before my surgery. One of the first places I went on my own after months of convalescence was a meeting of the International Socialists. I'd seen a poster on a lamppost. As everything in the outside world had taken on a new shine after I'd been cooped up in our dark apartment for months, I now noticed things like posters on lampposts. This led me through quite a few meetings with various Marxist organizations before I ended up at the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and found a community of activists who took me in, embraced me, and educated me. So many of the conversations in my life now revolved around justice, labour, and fighting the exploitation of the vulnerable, and my own difficult experiences as a young child began to seem small and inconsequential compared with the suffering I was learning about and now saw first-hand. After a year or so, at a dinner at John Clarke's house (John is the charismatic, brilliant founder of OCAP), someone asked me about being an actor as a child, and I reluctantly recounted some of the early experiences that had haunted me from the productions *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and *Road to Avonlea*. Where I thought I would find eye-rolls in the face of my undeniable privilege, I found empathy, understanding, a weaving of important political context, and a generous holding of my more troubling experiences.

I dove into a life of activism, helping to organize protests against cuts to welfare and healthcare and the attacks on the poor that the Conservatives presided over. Seeing first-hand the decimation of the already impossible lives of the most vulnerable people I had ever encountered made the idea of going off to university to *think* when there was so much to be *done* seem frivolous at best, and at worst offensive and selfish. My life became a series of meetings, protests, and conferences, imbued with the camaraderie of people who had dedicated their lives to justice. I had a community I was proud to be a part of, a place in the real world, and a purpose after many months of not even being able to move. This was so much more than my fantasy of being mobile and strong enough to go to the hardware store to buy the imagined nail for the unnamed project. In those activist years, full of conviction and purpose, I lost Corey, I lost school, and I gained a wild and practical education in direct activism.

Sometimes, during those intense years of organizing, I would be asked to speak at rallies or press conferences. I never felt I could say no, so I would write out my remarks, study them closely, and resign myself to weeks of not sleeping before I had to take a stage in front of people. Whenever I was asked to go onstage for any other reason, like an awards ceremony for film and television, I most often either said no or I said yes and then didn't show up at the last minute. I knew I would never again go onstage in any meaningful capacity. I had nightmares, many nights, that I was back on that stage again, forgetting lines, forgetting where I was, forgetting which side of the looking glass I was on.

I never told anyone the truth of what had happened in Stratford, until I met someone who had had an even more epic breakdown with stage fright than I. After my experience in Stratford, I had sought out and read any story about stage fright that I could find. There was Daniel Day-Lewis's famous walking off the stage during a production of *Hamlet*, Barbra Streisand forgetting her lyrics during a performance and then absenting herself from the stage for many years, Glenn Gould's resentment of the audience and his turning to the recording studio

instead of live performance, and the many other stories of terror of the stage that I found at once comforting and fascinating. One of the most famous stories was that of Ian Holm, who, when performing in *The Iceman Cometh* in 1976 while arguably the most successful actor in the English theatre, came onto the stage, looked at the audience, and said, simply, "Here I am, supposed to be talking to you . . . there are you, expecting me to talk . . ." He walked off the stage and didn't go back on for years.

When I was seventeen, I was cast in *The Sweet Hereafter*, in which I played a young girl in an incestuous relationship with her father. Donald Sutherland was supposed to play a lawyer, Mitchell Stephens, who represents the victims of a terrible bus crash, including my character, who has become paralyzed after the accident. At the last moment, to my incredible good fortune, Ian Holm was cast to replace him. One day, after rehearsals, we went out for dinner. I gently broached the subject of stage fright. He told me his story in his own words. Of course, fear of the stage had not been the only thing happening in Ian's life at the time. He felt as though the rest of his world was crumbling too. His paralysis onstage was partly a terror of the audience but also a culmination of personal events that he felt might crush him. As he told me his story, his eyes became haunted. The trauma of the stage fright was still difficult for him to talk about, after all those years.

I told him my own story of stage fright. I looked into the face of the man who would always, for me, be Charles Dodgson, who had loved Alice Liddell in *Dreamchild*, who had been hurt by her, broken by her, and I told him about how, as Alice, I had broken inside and then broken my body to escape. When I was finished I said to Ian, "I wanted to tell you, because you're the only person I know who might be crazier than I am."

He paused for a while and then said, with a smile, "No. You win. You're crazier."

A year later, Ian returned to the stage as King Lear. Recently, after hearing of his death, a mutual friend sent me a photo of a postcard he had written her at the time. He wrote: "LOVE to Polley. Tell her I take off all my clothes in King Lear." I laughed. He hadn't just gone back onstage to conquer his fear; he was giving it the middle finger.

The night I told him about my stage fright, we talked about his performance in *Dreamchild*. I told him that I thought the best acting moment I had ever seen was in a scene in which he goes to say "I love you" to little Alice but stops himself right after the word "I." (This was, in fact, my father's favourite moment in film history, which I had absorbed and parroted.)

Ian said, "No. I don't stop at 'I.' The tip of my tongue touches the roof of my mouth to say the *l* in 'love.' Then I am interrupted."

I left that dinner shaking and changed. The weight of the secret of my stage fright had been bearing down on me, crushing me, and filling me with a hatred for myself. Now the story felt as though it was part of my life. (It wasn't until this moment, as I write these words, that I am struck by the fact that I first told the story of playing the part of Alice and breaking to the actor who had played, and defined for me, Charles Dodgson.)

I thought I might call my aunt and cousin afterwards. But I didn't. The lie I had told them stood between us now, as a kind of menacing obstacle. I fell out of touch with them for years, unable to conceive how I could face them without speaking the truth, and horrified by what I felt that truth made me.

About fifteen years after my breakdown, I told my cousin Sarah. She said she felt sick. Not because she was angry but because she hadn't known that I was in such psychological pain. Because I hadn't let her, or anyone else, help. This response astonished me. I had spent years

fearing a conversation whose only threat was to heal me. When I told her how sorry I was for faking so much pain, she said, simply, "You *were* in so much pain."

In 2017, I received an honorary doctorate from McMaster University. My husband, David, had graduated from this university, and, given that I never graduated from high school, it meant a great deal to me to be invited to stand on that stage. But my stage fright had followed me throughout my life, never letting up. I would often curse myself for not finishing the run of *Alice*. I often wondered whether, if I had just completed those last ten shows I had committed to, I would still be locked in this anxiety, locked into these dreams of puberty gone haywire, at night.

I tried to think of what I could say, what I could contribute, to a group of students who had completed something that I never had. What did I have to offer? And then I realized that the only contribution I could possibly make was to share my terror, and to demonstrate overcoming it in front of them. I spent months preparing my speech. I went to a performance psychologist, Dr. Kate Hays, who worked with athletes and performers. I decided to tell, in excruciating detail, the story of my stage fright and how hard it was for me to be up there on that stage. I confessed in front of thousands of strangers how I had broken down, how I had lost control over the ends of my words, how I had gone mad, how I had rushed a major surgery to get out of it, how I had vowed to never go onstage again.

It was right after making this speech, from a stage in front of thousands, that my nightmares stopped. It has been years since I've dreamed of being on the Stratford stage, in that white pinafore, a mint in my mouth, not knowing the words. I even wonder sometimes if I might tell this story from that same stage one day. I see myself standing onstage, a misshapen, nonsensical world behind me, confessing the broken, terrified Alice that I was. I imagine that now I could look the audience in the eye and know that they were there to see the real me. Breasts and all.

"Oh, don't go on like that!" cried the poor Queen, wringing her hands in despair. "Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come to-day. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry!"

Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the midst of her tears. "Can you *keep from crying by considering things?" she asked.*

"That's the way it's done," the Queen said with great decision: "nobody can do two things at once, you know."

—Through the Looking-Glass

I have been "considering" this story (as opposed to crying about it), and writing this essay, for twenty-one years. The one (the considering) does indeed keep me from the other (the crying).

I recently revisited *Dreamchild*, that film of Lewis Carroll's (Charles Dodgson's) unrequited love for Alice Liddell, which was so loved by my father. As a grown woman, my father dead now for two years, I am gobsmacked by how differently I see the film on my own, compared to how I viewed it as a child sitting beside my father. I no longer see Dodgson as the innocent, the victim, who is unceremoniously spurned by the child Alice. In the scene that has lingered in my memory all these years, Alice splashes water in Dodgson's face while they row on that fateful day when he first spins the tales of Alice underground. Ian Holm, as Dodgson, flinches, his face shocked by the cold water, his heart shocked by the violence of Alice's rejection and mockery. I have carried around the memory of this moment in my head, with my father's sharp intake of breath on its soundtrack. I remember turning to him to see tears in his eyes. How could a child break a man's heart like that?

What I didn't remember was what preceded that moment: Dodgson stares at Alice in an unbroken, hypnotized gaze. He sees her beauty,

he sees her innocence, he sees her magic. What he doesn't seem to see is how terribly uncomfortable he is making her. I find it agonizing now, to watch from little Alice's point of view. No matter how troubled and uninviting her countenance, his focus on her is unchanged, unrelenting, and detached from her experience completely. She can't make his oppressive staring stop, no matter what facial expression she uses, so she ultimately splashes him in the face, thus breaking herself free from the prison of the gaze she is trapped in. She isn't just uncomfortable; she is terrified. And his preoccupying love, or perhaps, more accurately, his obsession with her, prevents him from seeing just how monstrous he has become to her. Or, perhaps more disturbingly, he does notice and, preferencing his love over her feelings of security and safety, he decides not to care.

After Alice splashes him, her mother reprimands her. Alice says: "But he was looking at me."

It is after this bewildering exchange between Dodgson and his muse that he begins to tell the *Alice* stories, and we are supposed to feel, I think, that all is now right with the world.

Towards the end of the film, a grieving Charles Dodgson says to Alice Liddell, "I hope you'll always remember our little moments together, my dear. Time can blot out so many, many things."

She replies, "Oh I couldn't forget. Not even if I tried."

"It was much pleasanter at home," thought poor Alice, "when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what

can *have happened to me! When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I'll write one—but I'm grown up now," she added in a sorrowful tone; "at least there's no room to grow up any more* here."

—Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
