

# AFTERMATH

Mary Moore Braunagel

**T**he Alaska Airlines pilot angled the plane so we passengers could see Mt. Saint Helen's exploded side. Debris spilled out from the still smoldering hole. I looked out over the Cascade Mountain range as the plane, powerful and heavy, leveled off and barreled northward from Seattle to Fairbanks. I was going to visit my sister, Patty. We would be backpacking on the Chilkoot Trail in the Yukon Territory for the second week of a two week vacation financed by our father. She had made all the arrangements and warned me that women backpacking had to take extra precautions during their menstrual periods to avoid grizzly bear attacks. That was unnerving; I didn't want life and death situations depending on my attention to detail.

The plane landed and I immediately felt how different the terrain and the ambiance of the location were from Atlanta, my home. Men were dressed in jeans, plaid shirts, and boots rather than business suits. It was the second week of July, and the sun had set about two hours earlier at 10:00 pm, settling in the chill. I wished I had a jacket. Isolated snatches of time float in my memory like collage entries. Isolated scenes: no before, no after. I remember driving up to the A-frame house that my sister had built with her ex-husband. Sleeping on the fold-out sofa in the living room for a week. There is one scene of an open-air halibut fish fry with Patty's co-worker, a red haired girl named Judy, and another was dinner at Patty's boyfriend's place.

On what seemed to be the day after the dinner but was really thirty days later, I opened my eyes to take in my sister at the foot of my hospital bed. Patty was a nurse at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, but she was visiting me as a family member. The whole room was not right. My sister looked different; she had packs of white gauze protruding from her nostrils. An ugly red scar stretched down her torso, although she was fully clothed. A bouquet of Black-Eyed Susan's jutted out of the TV; my sister was simultaneously at the right foot of my bed and at my right elbow. Instinctively, I slammed one eye shut. Now the flowers settled in the vase on a side table. There was only one



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sister and the ugly scar jumped to my belly, reaching from my breastbone to my pelvis. Patty told me I was being transported to another hospital for rehabilitation and another nurse, Doris, would be escorting me. When I opened both eyes but didn't answer, she burst into tears.

All planes from Fairbanks to the lower forty-eight left at night, so the next evening at 1:30 am, Doris and I inched our way up the air stairs from the runway to the door of the jet destined for Seattle. Mountains, barely visible in the pale moonlight, encircled us, eerily whispering, "Goodbye, thanks for visiting the Land of the Midnight Sun."

I couldn't understand why she opened the carton and poured my orange juice when breakfast was served, why she buttered my biscuit. Why did she accompany me everywhere, bolstering up my left side as I walked to transfer planes in Seattle? She even accompanied me to the bathroom. I remember catching a glimpse of a nurse and a patient in a mirror, the patient had her head shaven and was hunched over and limping. I reached to touch my head and felt the indentation where the shunt had once entered my skull.

## Flower at Crew

Ryan Humphries

With one arm hanging uselessly in a sling, one leg in a cast, one eye looking straight ahead while the other wandered aimlessly in my shaved head, Doris and I entered the lobby of Emory Hospital's Center for Rehabilitation. Like celebrities being swarmed by news crews, the rehabilitation team surrounded us. Bold sunlight streamed in through the tall windows and hit the gray marble floors. The mellifluous southern accents were so soothing and familiar. Young men and women in scrubs and flowered tunics milled around as if they had been expecting me. Upturned smiles and upswept hair greeted me as they approached cautiously asking how my trip here had been. When I answered, "Fine," it surprised me to hear the word slur and my voice blare.

One question startled me: "Do you know why you are here?"

I might have been told about the automobile accident in which I was injured, but it hadn't solidified in my long-term memory. I knew I had been on a trip to celebrate having earned a master's degree in Math, and now I couldn't tie my own shoes. The thought about my master's degree was a sizzling

griddle, too painful to touch; better withdraw my fingers from that thought for a decade or two.

I looked out at the circle of expectant young men and women who would restore my body and mind to a near approximation of my former self. I could feel my heart expanding with gratitude. I was going to be okay. Whatever was wrong with me, they would know how to fix it.

I thought again about the question, "Do you know why you are here?" I gave the only explanation I could, "I was attacked by a bear."

■ **Mary Moore Braunagel** received further rehabilitation services at Emory University and the Cognitive Development Center in Atlanta. She attended the Georgia Computer Programmer Project at Georgia Institute of Technology and then worked as a computer programmer for the State of Florida for 6 years. She has been a member of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at The Florida State University since 2011 where she began writing as a Member of the OLLI Writers Group.



**Papua, Indonesia**

Tyler Wellman