

PLAIN PAIN

BY PATRICIA VIGDERMAN

Pain — has an Element of Blank . . .
Emily Dickinson

ON A DAY when the slow New England spring was finally opening the buds on the trees, a cramp on my left side, which at 7 a.m. had seemed a puzzling stomach ache, around 8 a.m. seemed prepared to devour my entire body. Still in my robe and slippers, doubled over as much in surprise as in pain, I was bundled into the car. A few white plum blossoms drifted out of the backyard and across the windshield as we backed out the driveway.

The streets were brilliant with sunlight and flowering trees; it was a morning to survive the winter for. By the time we reached the door of the emergency room, though, season, time, and hope itself had become irrelevant.

"Can't you sit up?" said the attendant crossly, pulling at the wheelchair handles. "It's hard for me when you're flopped over like that."

"No, she can't," I heard someone say in the distance, but the exchange seemed both ludicrous and beside the point. The attendant's apparently callous involvement in her own problem (that is, my poorly balanced 120 pounds) was weightless against the unlikelihood of my ever sitting up again.

For the next couple of hours I lay on a stretcher, occasionally being shifted to an examining table or under an X-ray machine. A paramedic with a clipboard tried to comfort me. Doctors moved over, under, around, and through me. They asked me questions, which I answered with little barks or screams. Sometimes when they touched me I beat the wall with the side of my fist. By the time the last doctor, a gynecologist, got to me, I simply yelled.

Many years before, in childbirth, I had been similarly overtaken. In the astonishing course of a long, difficult labor I lost track of what the happy outcome of the pain was to be. Nevertheless, I didn't yell. I dealt with the waves of pain as I had been instructed — with breathing, with stroking — and ultimately with the profound conviction that to erupt in noise would be just too troublesome. In the years between that day and this, though, the injunction against female noise had been lifted; I discovered that I knew how to howl. All the way up from my gut came the pure sound of my flesh, a round, uncategorizable vowel.

The gynecologist finished her work quickly, and a nurse hurried in with a big shot of Demerol. In a few minutes I turned onto my back — light, free, amazed. The tiger of pain was licking its jaws in another part of the forest. The diagnosis was a kidney stone.

A kidney stone is a relatively minor and not uncommon medical condition. It is nevertheless

treated with great respect by the medical profession, because it is one of the most painful disorders the body can suffer. It is even mentioned in the Hippocratic oath: "I will not cut for the stone," doctors have been promising for centuries. Some of them, of course, do — to the eternal gratitude of their patients. The 17th-century diarist Samuel Pepys had a kidney stone once, and every year on the anniversary of its removal (by cutting) he gave a celebration. The safer treatment is to let the pebble make its way out by the usual exit. The patient's patience for this keeping of the oath is greatly enhanced by the miracle of anesthetic.

INTENSE PHYSICAL SUFFERING is an experience of highly focused isolation. It has no age or sex. Identity pulls in, far inside the prison flesh; taste, smell, sound, sight, even a loving touch are ash. In its senselessness, pain is like a dream, and it is similarly difficult to remember. Memory depends on physical associations — the taste of the madeleine, the scent of jasmine or seaweed. Pain has nothing but itself. Metaphor collapses, emerging only later in the shape of fire, or a tiger. It is not an adventure. On the high plains of pain there is one hero: the inventor of anesthetic. Civilization and its contents drift elsewhere.

The morning of the first of May, I awoke early to the sound of bells, flutes, tambourines, and discovered I was neither drugged nor in pain. Drawn out of bed by the music, I pushed the heavy curtain at the hospital window aside. Below me on the street, in jerkins and ribbons and bells, a procession of Morris dancers piped a rhythmic and raggedy song. Behind a fluttering Maypole a small girl in a long, dark dress, her mess of blond hair lit up by the early sun, tipped her head back to laugh . . . in excitement at the pageant, in joy at the crazy morning.

Had I awaked in pain, unwilling to breathe for fear of tipping off the tiger, her laughter would have risen to the dawn sky without pausing at my window. But that was a crazy morning for me, too. The absence of pain had left me clear and empty; that flushed child's face, like a painting of Eternal Pleasure, pulled easily at my soul, bringing it to the surface like a trout.

Balanced once again on my own two feet, I watched quietly as my weary body, newly fluent in the language of suffering, nevertheless opened its ears to the dancing in the street. ■

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