2014 Thomas A. Wilhelmus Nonfiction Award Winner

Having Faith

A nurse named Faith tells me an urban legend: "More organs come in during the season," she says, as if she were talking about a shipment of Thanksgiving turkeys. "More people die on holidays." This interests me. I wonder if that includes Devil's Night, Detroit's festival of arson, or Halloween. It is already mid-September and as a fan of horror movies, I'm uneasy about having a stranger's body part sewn into mine on either of those nights. Not that I'd refuse. Beggars can't be idiots.

As she talks to me, Faith washes her hands and stares at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. In her 40s and newly divorced, she seems to have rediscovered her high cheekbones. She angles her head and purses her lips, summoning a defiant, weathered beauty. She is comfortable enough to do this in front of me, just one of the ways I'm reminded how invisible sick people are, even in the hospital.

Then Faith huddles next to my hospital bed as if it were a campfire. Her perfume is almost as sweet smelling as the Jolly Rancher in her mouth. "More organs come in," she repeats. "Especially hearts."

Mine needs replacing. My transplant evaluation has been a three-week assault and battery of tests, which if I pass, will put me on The List. Meanwhile, I ask my large family not to visit my Ann Arbor Hospital room that features a pronounced lack of seating and surface space. Visitors are as cumbersome to accommodate as vases of flowers or the huge cards sent by my parents' friends—pastel envelopes that sometimes arrive insufficiently licked and therefore unsealed, the edges exposed like paper cut machetes. Written on the cards are phrases in Cancerese, since cancer is the universal language of illness, and whether or not you have it, the clichés are like *So glad they caught it early*, which in my case, they hadn't. Heart transplants are the medicine of last resort.

On his rounds the next morning, I mention the urban legend to my cardiologist, Dr. Miller. "Yes, I've heard that, too. The holiday heart transplant." His air-quote fingers are busy pressing against my neck as he takes my pulse, but the rise of his dark eyebrows indicates skepticism. Together, we watch his watch and breathe politely—that is, through our noses. In the hospital, everyone fears everyone else's breath.

Dr. Miller's age and marital status are common knowledge among the nurses, thanks to Faith, who elicits stats from all the male doctors under sixty with subtle inquires like "Mind if I ask how old you are?" followed up with "You married?" Faith has told me Dr. Miller is a bachelor in his early forties.

"He's never been married," she said. "Those are rare."

Or maybe he's gay, I think, and hasn't been in the right United State at the right time, like my partner James and me.

Dr. Miller and I have our age in common, though I seem younger than him, if only in the way he hogs all the power in the room, standing next to my bed looking down on me while I smooth my hospital gown and cross my legs at the ankles. I have always been attracted to people who are reportedly attractive, even if I don't find them to be at first. It's this way with Dr. Miller. Even though his head-to-toe Banana Republic uniform is an unmistakable symptom of having no sense of style, it is also evidence of trying, which is something.

Minute's up, and Dr. Miller removes his warm fingers. I catalogue the reasons people touch other people's necks. Murder. Medicine. Sex. Never casually.

"You are my youngest transplant evaluee." It's a statement about himself masquerading as one about me. My gaydar is failing to home in on his Kinsey scale location, but if this were any other situation, I would think he was flirting with me. I recross my ankles.

Sometimes I forget my heart is so sick. Parts of me are still vibrant: my curiosity, my urge to connect, my vanity. These are the individual components of sex drive, and it's as if they haven't been informed that they have been laid off. Even my old identity as a healthy, athletic person stubbornly persists, until I find myself staring in the mirror, winded from the unimpressive act of brushing my teeth.

Likewise, I forget I am a new dad, which may be why James has taped pictures of our six-month-old daughter all over the walls of my small room.

Dr. Miller points to a picture. "She in school yet?" I guess he doesn't remember much about child development from his pediatric rotation in medical school.

"Not in school yet. Taking a year off to study for the MCATS," I say.

"Ha." More of a statement than a laugh, a kind of confirmation of having received my attempt at humor.

Then he is all business, taking notes on my medical history, a narrative I'm able to rattle off. How three years ago, while training for a marathon, I fell to the ground as if I had been unplugged. How I supposedly caught a bad heart like one catches a cold: through a virus. My heart puffed up to defend itself, but remained dilated and weakened, like a hand stunned by a good night's rest, unable to squeeze itself back into a tight fist. How I went from having one doctor—an

internist I rarely saw—to having a team of them. How I became a collector of doctors, each with increasingly flashy specializations—the electrophysiologist with her superhero title, is my favorite possession. For a while I even had a nuclear radiologist who made me drink a shake blended with radioactive tracers, allowing my compromised blood flow to be photographed by a gamma camera, a device that sounds as retro as it does futuristic. I detail for Dr. Miller the two operations to implant defibrillators (the first one faulty), my episode of sudden death, and the lull in my heart's deterioration during which our daughter was born, and after which my heart failures intensified.

"I need to live, Doc." He seems as unmoved by my conclusion as I am by his response to it: *You're receiving the best care in the country.*

I've heard that from every doctor in every cardiovascular center I visit. It's not that I don't want to believe it each time I hear it, but they can't all be right: Beth Israel in New York, Cedars Sinai in Los Angeles, Cleveland Clinic, Henry Ford in Detroit, as well as a major sampling of the university hospitals at Vanderbilt, George Washington, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, and finally the University of Michigan where I am to be transplanted, that is, if I qualify. I'm an expert patient, at least it seems I have put in my ten thousand hours.

Faith enters with fresh lipstick. Whenever Dr. Miller is in my room she is never far behind.

"By the way," he says to me, nodding to Faith as if to signal the source of the legend, "there's no evidence of more transplants on holidays." He smiles.

Hearing him say it disappoints and relieves me. Faith is right about one thing, though. Dr. Miller's smile is genuine enough to make you feel you caused it, whether or not that is true. "It's just hospital legend."

So is your smile, I think. Later I will lie to the nurses that I actually said this, which they will think is *hilarious*. I need all available shortcuts to intimacy, and laughter is the most efficient. I'm vulnerable enough to want the nurses to like me, and sick enough to need them to like me, and the whole business of being sick and trying to be liked takes up heartbeats I can't spare.

Dr. Miller washes up and leaves. I cover my cold legs with a bed sheet that feels like paper.

"I don't care what he says. It's not a legend, believe me," Faith insists. "I have been in heart transplantation for ten years, and every year more heart transplants happen on holidays. Simple as that."

When I was first admitted three weeks ago, Faith spent two days recapping reruns of *Will and Grace*, working under some assumption that the sitcom is a staple of every gay man's television diet.

"Did you see last night's *Will and Grace*? The one that starts with Karen holding up a martini?"

"They all start that way."

Like my mother, Faith speaks about reruns as though they had just aired for the first time. She is not very clear about the concept of syndication and local station programming.

When Faith runs out of sitcom episodes, she tells stories about her own life, which are a vast improvement, though I can't tell what is true or just meant for my distraction. Her stories are well worn and a bit too tidy: all movie with none of the moviemaking. Her ex-husband cheating on her with her best friend, her great-grandfather's struggle as an orphan who became a vaudeville star. Recently, she speaks about how Dr. Miller, she was sure, was following her down to the lab, hoping to catch her alone to ask her on a date. All are plausible, if a bit rife with romance.

"Oh, I could write a book, believe me." Faith has discovered something about storytelling, which is that well-told stories intertwine fantasy and memory so tightly that in the unspooling, the gradations of truth are blurred, like a figure skater's undulating shape in the final spin of her long program. People will throw roses at that shit.

Her storytelling is enjoyable at first. But after a week, I begin to feel like her captive audience, especially since, like many good storytellers, Faith isn't much of a listener. We have several versions of the following conversation about my daughter:

"What country did you and your partner adopt her from?"

"We didn't adopt. We had her through surrogacy."

"Oh my God, that's amazing."

"I know. But it's a complicated way to have a kid."

"How old was she when you adopted her?"

"Uh…"

Faith's nursing is reduced to a perfunctory question at the end of her stories like, "You still doing all right? Good. Freshen up your water?" After an hour, she returns without the water pitcher to continue her story with her favorite transition: "So anyhooot." Several times, she is paged while in my room and sneaks out, leaving me with the impression she has been "caught" spending too much time there.

The second week into my stay, I wish Faith would lose my room number. Things cool between us as my curiosity about her life plummets, which makes listening to her unbearable—not that she seems to notice. I do the modern pantomime for *Would you fuck off, please?*, which is to text, usually to my sister, when she tells her stories.

ME: SHE'S BACK. THE MAGPIE NURSE. I'M DYING HERE.

MY SISTER: NOT FUNNY. ABOUT THE DYING I MEAN.

But Faith isn't so easily ignored. She just changes the subject to one she knows will get under my skin—her insistence on the holiday heart transplant. It messes with my head. My evaluation is well under way and with the holidays around the corner, I am confused about what I fear more: that the legend will be true, or that it won't be.

"In spite of your name, you are a woman of science, right?" I ask.

"You better believe it."

"If that legend were true, it would be measured and recorded. Like in the *New England Journal of Medicine* or a cover story for *People*."

"I suppose you've read all the issues?"

"There's this thing called the Internet—"

"Listen, know-it-all. Measurements are recorded every day and not revealed, thank God. My weight, for example."

"Ha," I say. *I am in receipt of your attempt at humor.* Faith's comic timing induces knee-jerk laughter, where you laugh more at the container of humor rather than at the humor it contains. "That's just a conspiracy theory. Why would the medical community hide evidence of heart transplants done on holidays?"

"Why *wouldn't* they?"

I roll my eyes. "You give me agita."

"I just thought you might like to know about the probability, considering."

Her last word is a stinging reminder of my situation.

"You heard Dr. Miller, right? There's no evidence." Faith bristles. Like many nurses, she does not like to be contradicted by a patient, and even less so by a doctor, especially one on whom she has a crush, unrequited from what I've observed.

"Oh, him?" She glances over her shoulder. "Not much evidence of his skill as a surgeon either, but he's still operating." She sighs with an air of hopelessness. "You can believe whatever you want."

"I am trying to." Truth is, I'd rather keep my own heart, even with its S4 gallop and mitral valve regurgitation. I am still attached to it. The idea of someone else's heart beating at my core fills me with dread.

Meanwhile Faith seems to want some verbal proof that I will celebrate Thanksgiving dinner, or my daughter's first Christmas morning, or New Year's Eve staring at my cell phone, hoping for someone's brain death to save my life. I won't give her the satisfaction.

Faith and I reach an impasse. We have run the course of our friendship, and like any relationship that has progressed too far too fast; we question each

other's motives. I suspect her of wanting my heart transplant timing to support the tidiness of the legend she likes to tell. I know first hand the kind of clean romantic narrative she prefers to push. Maybe she suspects I have complained to the floor nurse (something I plan to do) about Faith hanging out in my room, chatting incessantly and posing in the mirror.

But I never get the chance. Faith breaks up with me first by coming in the next night to curtly inform me she has a few days off.

Faithless days ensue, very pleasurable at first. I catch up on my reading, take notes in my journal and celebrate the uninterrupted spaces of time.

Other nurses come, but are more professional in their demeanor. They escort me to my invasive tests, including my least favorite and most often repeated procedure, the right heart catheterization, in which a sheath is threaded into my jugular vein, down my neck, and into my heart's chambers to measure its pressures. No anesthesia is used because the procedure is considered merely uncomfortable rather than painful: a distinction without a clue.

In fact, the right heart catheterization sometimes causes pain, but more pointedly, it hurts my sense of privacy to have the contents of my heart prodded, quantified and called out in bored voices that I get to hear for myself, even in the face of my panic. The pressures of the chambers have to be low enough to qualify for a heart transplant, but not so low as to not survive one. A donor's heart cannot be wasted on the merely heartsick any more than it can be on those too close to death. The successful candidate has to hover in a sweet spot between hopeful and hopeless. The "score" of the right heart catheterization is an important determining factor in who gets awarded a donor's heart and who is condemned to go the distance (however short) with their original.

From underneath the sterile draping, I sometimes ask how I'm doing. With a sheath inserted and threaded so close to my vocal chords, the medical staff recommends I don't talk, and I might say the same to them when they discuss sports or lunch. Once someone holds my hand and I say thank you, but never know who it was. Afterwards, I'm wheeled out bruised and bandaged from the puncture wound in my neck. I'm taken back to my small room by a quiet technician and it occurs to me that I miss Faith.

I also regret telling my family not to visit. My sister Kathryn would be able to tell me what to focus on, but instead of asking her to come, I text:

I NEED A PICTURE OF MY BABY.

She sends one of my mother giving my daughter a bottle, which makes me smile, because my baby is thriving, but also sad because my baby is thriving. Without me. My daughter looks a little less familiar. Less infantile since the last time I held her, a month ago.

ME: TELL ME SOMETHING ABOUT HOME ANYTHING. I don't bother defining whose home.

KATHRYN: WE ARE IN MOM'S KITCHEN HAVING A CONTEST TO FIND THE OLDEST EXPIRATION DATE. HENRY FOUND A SALAD DRESSING OLDER THAN HIM.

My nephew is ten.

I think of my mother's small overheated kitchen and how she ladled spaghetti sauce as hot as lava over steaming noodles. I'm hungry, but when the dietician comes in to take my dinner order, I am crying. He is uncomfortable and says, "I'll come back later," but doesn't, so I go without. Faith might have rectified this. She is nowhere.

In the following days, I stop talking to everyone except the doctors, and only then to ask when the hell I will be released. Unfortunately, discharge times are carefully guarded secrets. Nurses or doctors become politicians when asked about them, and they refuse to be quoted. They know that if a patient is armed with his own discharge time, he wields it like a weapon, holding them to it, making the drudgery of discharge all the more drudgurious. Of course, the real secret about discharge plans is that there is no plan—they happen when they happen, a phrase with reasoning as irrefutable as "it is what it is." And every bit as satisfying, like opening an email to read the sentence "*This email has no content*," written in italics as if it were urgent.

And still, no sign of Faith. She was an effective hunter of my time, having mercilessly killed so much of it, and without her interruptions, my time breeds around me unchecked. I long for one of her stories. Or her description of a *Will and Grace* episode. I'd welcome her posing and primping, her obsession with Dr. Miller, or her belief in a legend that would predict when I'd get the call for a heart.

I stop asking when I will get out. This disturbs me the most. People leave me alone for hours at a time, which is never the fantasy it appears from afar. I am as sick of everyone's care as they are of giving it, and none of us seem to be hiding that fact. Vicious boredom all around, but at least they get to leave me by leaving the room. And they do, but not before taking a note that I suspect is *Hostile Patient* or *Suspected Dementia*. Maybe even *No Longer a Candidate for Transplant*. Like a right heart catheterization score, the psychological evaluation also is a determining factor, and yet I resent the social worker when she tries to mask her mental status exam in small talk. Yet I am lonely for interaction, even if my bitterness may end up transcribed in my medical records. The hospital and I are trapped in a miserable marriage.

Then Faith passes in the hallway! I have my door open for just this reason, and there she is.

"FAITH," I yell, and the desperation in my voice startles me. She walks by without looking in, and after a few seconds, I wonder if it was even her.

I break down and ask my sisters and brothers to visit. They mention a day or two in the future, citing their kids' hockey and lacrosse games, in-law obligations. Was it me who asked them not to visit in the beginning? Or had they never offered? Now I suspect the latter. Time to call my parents.

As I am dialing, Dr. Miller comes in to tell me the panel has voted to list me in a few days' time.

"I'm on the heart transplant list?"

"You are." Dr. Miller smiles. "You made it." He smiles his smile, but I stare it off his face. Besides his phrasing bugs me.

"When can I leave here?"

"Tomorrow," he says. "The nurse will fill you in about discharge. And about how you will be notified of a heart. You really are a good candidate."

I thank him. In spite of myself, I am pleased to have pleased him. I don't like this about myself.

"He really is cute," he says, pointing at my daughter's picture.

"He is a she."

"That's right. Sorry. She is a princess."

"Yes. Thank you." I have decided he is straight.

That night for the first time during my three-week hospitalization, I sleep so soundly I dream of sleep.

The next day, I am feeling almost myself when Faith comes in to say goodbye. She seems to have lost weight, and I notice there is a freshness about her. From her expression I can see her register the opposite about me. We force a hug, our faces telescoping back to avoid each other's eyes, like one-night stands passing in a grocery store aisle. I have an urge to whisper an apology, but I also want one. I am confused about what offense I should give or take. I suspect she and Dr. Miller are dating. *Good for you* is a thing people say and don't mean, but I think it and mean it for the time being.

My parents arrive to collect me. My dad gathers my bags, and my mother pushes me down the hall in a wheelchair with her arthritic hands—an experience I wouldn't wish on any parent or child.

Faith calls out, "Happy Holidays."

"Same to you," I say, though it is only the beginning of October.

"And Happy New Year. Stay by your phone!" It feels like she has hurled an incantation at me. My parents wheel me into the elevator.

"Happy New Year?" my dad asks.

"She's kind of a witch," I say, more to myself, but my parents laugh, maybe thinking I said *bitch*. They are going through a pre-elderly rebellion. My mother,

a formerly devout Catholic, now enjoys skipping mass on Sundays and bragging about it. My dad's rebellion takes the form of cursing. He thinks the phrase "what the fuck" is an ideal response to anything, and with regard to what is in store for me, I couldn't agree more.

The three of us exit into the bright sunshine of a stunning Ann Arbor fall. The air is fragrant from decay. The leaves left on the branches are vibrant in their last days. Some are falling, others are dried up and crunched underfoot by students on their way to have sex or get a coffee or go to the gym.

"Thank you for picking me up." I hug my mother and the effort exhausts me.

"I wish you would have let us visit more."

She squeezes my hand and my eyes turn hot. It is all too much, the beauty and the decay. Her arthritic hand in mine.

"So do I."

My appreciation of everything has always been delayed. How I love the summer in the fall, fall in the winter and so on. My nostalgia for the recent past nags me just enough to muck up my present. I would have tossed out the get-well cards sent by my parents' friends, but my mother has packed them in my bag where they will remain until James discovers them and reads some to me. In spite of myself, I will be comforted. Likewise, I am grateful to Faith for the small part of my mind that believes in her legend.

My father comes in for what I think is a hug, but he is trying to hold me under the arms in order to lower me into the car. It is awkward enough that I think we will both fall, but I give him my weight and we both manage. "Buckle up," he says. I think of how I will soon be holding my own child. Lowering her down into her crib for a nap. We are all in the world together until we are not. That too is something.

I make sure my cell phone is on.

"What a day." I say.

"What the fuck," my dad says.

The phone call comes the evening before Thanksgiving, a night sometimes referred to as Black Wednesday. I am transplanted on Thanksgiving morning, and wake later in the day feeling hollowed out by what was taken, overwhelmed by what was given.