

## CANCER

It is New Year's day and we're stuck in traffic on Rockville pike few miles from the house. It is the beginning of our fourth year in the house, and we both know that it will be the last, though we haven't gotten down to talking about moving. It's just too depressing here, too much bad, too little good.

Less than one hundred yards in front of us is open roadway taunting us, unreachable. Between the open road and us workmen are filling huge chunk holes on the deck of an overpass. The weather over the last few weeks has been erratic--bitter cold spells punctuated by warm days, which has caused the roads and in a few cases, water mains, to buckle and burst. There are holes in the concrete of the bridge deck that expose rusty steel reinforcement bars like twisted, ignored veins. Above, crows fly by intermittently.

"Lori's mother died of hers," she says as she watches the men fill the holes with gooey tar. "Her father married some young bimbo six months later. Sandi's just went away, her cancer, I mean. She didn't have surgery or therapy, it just disappeared. She scared to death that it will just show up again someday." She has been cataloging every case that she knows of as if she is looking for a pattern like the pattern of black spots that is beginning to emerge on the bridge deck.

The sky is beginning to fill with ravens returning to the woods. They winter every year in Rockville in the woods that haven't been bulldozed over for housing tracts. Their cries build into a chorus in the evening when they return from their day of foraging.

A few of the birds land on the shoulder of the road and seem to watch the workmen. Soon they blacken the side of the road and mill around nervously. One of them takes flight and lands on the hood of our car. He peers in at us and she makes a face at the bird. He cocks his head as though he's confused. She laughs. "He's cute, kinda," she says. I inch the car forward and the bird flaps his wings to maintain his balance. His talons scratch at what's left of the enamel on the hood of the car.

"Caroline went three surgeries, but she's been good for five years now. But she's like Sandi, living in fear that it will come back. I'm not sure I can live with that." She pauses and laughs weekly, and turn to me. "Say it. I know you're going to say it, so say it." She has the hardest look I've ever seen on her face.

"What?"

"Say what you always say, 'think of the alternative Caryn.' You know you were going to say it." She stares at me for a minute, then faces forward again. Another raven lands on the car and then another. People in the other cars point at us. Some people are smiling while others have slightly terrified looks on their faces. Soon our car is covered with birds, squawking and flapping their wings occasionally pecking at each other with their beaks.

Through the birds I can see the other cars begin to move and I inch the car forward. As we start to move, birds begin to take flight until there is only one raven left. Something makes me believe that it is the first one that landed on the car. He fights to keep his balance, and for a second I drive slowly so he won't fall off the car. A look over at her but she is oblivious to me and I downshift and hit the gas catching the bird off guard. He falls back onto the windshield and tries to flap his wings. In a moment he's swept onto the roof. I shift into a higher gear and press the gas pedal to the floor, and I don;t even look into my rear view mirror. I just keep going.