THE FOGHORN COUGH

BY

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I don't remember quite when it started, sometime around the fall of my fourth grade year, when I was nine, perhaps earlier. It sounded like a foghorn, that cough, like the call of a goose. It grew in my chest, took hold of me there, and shook me from the inside. Then it flew out through my throat. It was dry—no phlegm—and, most of the time, it didn't hurt. Sometimes I had fits of it, especially when I exerted any physical effort. Sometimes it came just once, let me rest, and then came again a few moments later. I thought of it as a nuisance, like my allergies, which had grown worse that year. It was strange: something that was a part of me and yet not. It clung to me like an annoying pet: Maia and her cough. Sometimes it flew out instead of my voice when I tried to yell. Sometimes it soared when I cleared my throat.

Our dinner table was set next to a wall of windows facing the woods lining our backyard. Through those woods, about three or four miles from our house, was a train station. Every night at our seven p.m. dinner we heard the trains coming in from Boston or Worcester, blasting warning horns as they slowed to a halt. "Hey Maia, it's you!" my parents or my brother Eli, the rare times he ate with us, teased me. I'd sit at my place at the end of the table and laugh along with them, though if it was Eli—it wasn't often since that fall Eli had become mysteriously and violently ill and spent most of his time in bed with migraines—I'd give him a good, "Shut up!"

The cough grew more frequent as the year progressed.

Spasms of it erupted when I tried to play soccer, but nobody on my soccer team commented on it. My father, the assistant coach, was the exception. He began to facetiously call me "the goose," with the playful tone his voice would acquire whenever he cracked a smile. Yet, when I tried to laugh about it with my teammates, or with people at school, they never responded. Sometimes I heard my parents helplessly joking about their daughter the goose, their daughter the foghorn, to other parents on the opposite side of the field at our games, but those parents silently shuffled their feet and looked back at the field, at their own children. And then, with furrowed brows, my mother and father did the same.

I began spending more and more time sitting at the side of the field, more preoccupied with searching for clean spots on the wet ground where the grass hadn't been overturned by soccer cleats, spots free of goose droppings, than I was with the game. If I found no place to sit I squatted, wrapping my folded legs in my arms, even though squatting made my knees ache like fire. I stared at the geese that collected on the far side of the field, until one of my coaches called me to drag myself back to play. A sense grew in me that year that my body was losing its substance, as if I were a pillow with a rip in it, and all my feathers were slowly drifting out. With that feeling, coupled with the emotional stress created by Eli's as-yet-undiagnosed illness at home, my voice thinned to a whisper. I became increasingly shy. Yet that cough was full; it had all the body I was losing.

By the spring of that year, my mother was still busy taking Eli to various doctors, and managing the issues with his school, so it was my father who finally took me to my pediatrician for the cough. I saw Dr. Abrams every year for my physical, and when I got particularly bad cases of the flu. I was getting the flu more often and more severely, so I had seen her many times that year. She recommended nebulizer treatment, to determine whether my cough was due to allergies. I sat in my bedroom with my mother, put my mouth over the tubular opening at the top of the nebulizer, and breathed in the steam. The nebulizer didn't help. My parents tried humidifiers; perhaps my cough was due to dryness in the air. The humidifiers didn't help.

Dr. Abrams sent me to a pulmonologist. My father took me to that appointment too, but only stood quietly behind me, and occasionally walked out to the hall to answer pages about his patients, while I answered the questions of the nurse who did the intake. She asked if either of my parents smoked.

"My father did when I was little," I told her. "But he quit when I was four."

"Oh good for him," she said with a smile.

The doctor ordered my first X-rays, apart from those done at the dentist. I knew the busy, loaded atmosphere of hospitals, and the smell that permeates them, because my grandmother had died of a long illness the year before. But the dark radiology room, equipped with its hard, yet shadowed, furniture (all specially designed to reveal the insides of the body) seemed closer to the dark side of a Roald Dahl novel than to a medical facility. When the technician put the lead gear over my shoulders, I asked: "What's that for?"

"Oh, it's just something we use when we give you X-rays," he answered, distractedly, and then walked out, leaving me standing with my side to the wall, rooted to the floor like Daphne in her laurel tree. He came back a few times, adjusted the lead, and told me to turn so that my other side was to the wall; my back was to the wall; my chest was to the wall. With each turn I almost tipped, or crumpled like a cardboard box with too much weight on it. The technician didn't come and free me right when he was done, but through the window that separated the dark room in which I remained, from the room into which he had walked, I saw a light go on. My father walked to the window, smiled, and waved. I grinned and waved back.

The X-rays came out fine: nothing wrong with my lungs. The pulmonologist diagnosed me with a cough habit, as if instead of the desire to pick my nose or bite my nails, I had felt the urge to cough. I had developed this habit so well that I could cough loud as a goose high up in the air, so well that I often coughed in my sleep and woke myself up. He recommended cognitive behavioral therapy, but, still traumatized and indignant over the behavioral therapy that had been prescribed for Eli's migraines, my parents didn't send me.

I could, sometimes, cough when I wanted to, although then the cough wasn't as strong. I was strangely proud of this ability: I looked at it as a special talent. Perhaps the control forcing the cough gave me made it easier to avoid thinking that the cough could be a sign of something wrong.

Eli was still very sick by the end of that spring, but every so often he'd rise up from the couch, given just a little ounce of energy that would sink back away within the hour. And upright and moving, yet still uncomfortable, he would turn his energy on me. He hit me with pillows, wrestled with me when I wanted to be alone, grabbed my book away while I was reading. He often barreled right into my room, and tormented me there, or he took hold of me and dragged me into the family playroom. There was no getting away from him until he ran out of energy. Eli had always been a shining example of the typical big brother but his teasing had escalated significantly since the onset of his illness and taken on a tortured edge. He also no longer balanced it with kindness and the need to be protective of me. Despite being ill, Eli was stronger than I was. Even though he often left me crying, I don't think he had any notion of the harm he was doing, wrapped up in his cloud of hell. He was not only annoying me, he was often hurting me, and I was beginning to hate him.

One afternoon, I became desperate. He had me in the playroom and was jerking me around by my wrists. The more he pulled them, the more obvious it became that my wrists were weak and tender: his simple hold on them hurt, not just the jerking. I couldn't pull away, or maneuver my hands out of his, because of the pain. Eli stood there in front of me, laughing as I tried, laughing as I grew more and more upset, twisting my arms around from the wrists, high on the only physical power he had: his power over me.

Finally, I resorted to the one thing I had that was stronger than his grip: my cough. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his bad breath as he laughed, so close that all I could see were his white teeth and the red back of his throat. I coughed full on, straight in his face. The effort of trying to get away from him gave the cough its full volume and power. Eli jumped away in a quarter of a second, and squirmed as if a rat was crawling

around under the back of his shirt. He looked as if he was about to cry.

"Mom! *Mom!* Maia *coughed* on me, she *coughed* on me!" he wailed. I had been calling her as he wrestled with me but apparently not loud enough, she hadn't come. Now Eli began to run out of the playroom, going to tell my mother what I had done to him. I ran after, suddenly feeling both guilty and indignant; all I had done was stick up for myself.

My mother came in before Eli reached the door. I stood back as Eli, his eyes now damp with tears, cried: "She coughed on me, she coughed on me! Tell her never to cough on me!"

"Maia, don't cough on Eli!" Fear rang through my mother's voice.

I tried, half-heartedly, to explain why I had done it, to defend myself. My mother remembered her role of mediator, and told us to stop bickering with one another. Then she left. Eli, still shaken, walked back to the couch and, turning on the television, muttered: "Why would you ever do that? Stupid bitch." He wouldn't look at me as he said it. I remained standing in the middle of the room, left with the uncomfortable feeling that had arisen as I watched Eli cry. It was something I had never felt so keenly before, not when I squatted at the side of the soccer field among the goose shit and gazed at the geese, not when I joked about my cough to my friends at school and they didn't joke back. I didn't think that my cough was a sign of illness—Eli was the one with an illness—but I realized that it was something dirty: something that could be carried by a dirty animal. I never coughed on anyone again. Eventually my parents stopped the humidifiers. They continued to affectionately call me the foghorn. And that dirty thing remained inside of me.