

a crooked smile

a memoir

terri tate

may 2007

Ouch!”

The make-up artist, a friend of mine, yanked another hair from my brow.

“This shaping is going to make you look so much better,” Kathleena assured me. “Eyebrows make the face.”

The pain was a welcome distraction from my anxiety. In fifteen minutes I was going to walk onto the stage of the most upscale venue I'd ever played to perform my solo show, *Shopping as a Spiritual Path*, for hundreds of people in San Francisco's Jewish Community Center. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, more—who knew?—would then watch the DVD in the privacy of their own homes.

“You know you want to look your best on TV,” Kathleena added.

I couldn't argue the point, so I let her pluck away. “My best” was not what it used to be before cancer surgery rearranged my face, so I avoided the mirror as she worked. Moving on from my eyebrows, Kathleena applied bordello-worthy quantities of makeup, all the while assuring me that everyone needs this level of camouflage for video.

Except while awaiting biopsy results, I had never been this nervous. I tried to run my lines in my head and drew a complete blank. When I glanced at my script, the words swam on the page. None of them looked even remotely familiar.

Kathleena pronounced me done and passed me off to my friend Jo Anne, who was working wardrobe. Jo helped me slip into tapered black pants and a satiny bronze shirt over a sparkly, slinky bronze tank top. She said I looked great. As we left the green room, I allowed myself a glance at the full-length mirror. From a distance and without my glasses, I still looked pretty good: big green eyes sparkling between heavily blackened lashes; tall, thin-ish, and as my mother used to say, a body made for clothes.

Jo ushered me down the hall, her hand on my elbow so I couldn't bolt out a side door. We walked between thick ropes onto the stage. She positioned me behind the dense, maroon velvet curtain; gave me a quick, encouraging squeeze; and abandoned me. I could hear the expectant buzz of the crowd—one of my all-time favorite sounds. What was I so nervous about? I should be proud. I hadn't been expected to live, much less become a low-voltage star.

I reminded myself that this wasn't a life-or-death matter and did my best to replace my shallow panting with the deep breathing actors are trained to do. I told the voice that lives in my head—the one I call the Vile Bitch Upstairs—to shut up. I promised the inner child I call the Girl in the Closet that I wouldn't beat up on her no matter how it went. Then I whispered a prayer asking God to come with me and stepped out from between the curtains.

under my tongue

I am not in the habit of inspecting the underside of my tongue. But one blustery Michigan night in December 1990, I was brushing my teeth when a strange stinging sensation caused me to peek under there. Halfway back, on the left, I saw a raw spot about the size of a pencil eraser. I called my fiancé over to take a look. “I get those all the time,” Jeff said. “It’ll go away in a few days.”

Reassured, I crawled into our king-sized bed and went to sleep.

Jeff and I had just set a wedding date. He’d proposed to me the first time we went out together and, a few months later, slipped the engagement ring of my dreams onto my finger. The bold, asymmetrical design was clearly the work of my favorite jeweler whom I had taken Jeff to meet on our second date. The round-cut diamond was held aloft by a curved gold band on top and a zigzag band below into which a wedding band would someday fit. Or not. I gratefully accepted the ring but was in no hurry to wed. If I married Jeff, our wedding would be my third.

I married my first husband, Tom, when I was twenty. We had two wonderful sons. Then our union succumbed to the open marriage craze of the 1970s that hit Unitarians in Ann Arbor especially hard.

I took up with Michael at thirty. He was brilliantly funny, sexy, and brimming with potential. I knew from the start he was a bad boy. But I was certain that marriage to me would settle him down. That was one excruciating divorce.

Now, at forty-four, my new fiancé gave me reason for hope. Jeff was sweet and sensitive, and I had never dated anyone so good-looking. He had striking silver hair that shone in the sunlight, an almost-pretty face with well-defined, elegant features, and lively brown eyes that promised mischief, mystery, and wisdom. His soft, bronze skin was stunning to look at and luscious to the touch. Just walking beside him made me feel better about myself.

More important, Jeff was the first man I'd met who shared my somewhat quirky faith in God and my long-standing interest in spiritual exploration. Tom was an atheist. Michael vowed, and I think believed, that baseball was the path to the Godhead. Jeff had spent seven years in seminary and since then had pursued an even broader range of spiritual paths than I had.

Maybe this one could work. I agreed to marry him in a year.

We shared our happy news with my parents at a holiday gathering the week before Christmas. I knew Mom would be pleased. In our only conversation about sex, she had warned me against being one of those women who "gave the milk away for free." I was ten at the time and already confused by the pamphlet she had given me on the birds and the bees. I couldn't imagine what milk had to do with it. Now that I understood, I knew she would be glad that Jeff was going to "buy the cow."

Mom was sipping a martini and looking smashing in a white blouse with the collar turned up, black pants, and a red-and-black sweater. Mom could take an outfit from J. C. Penney and make it look like Prada. As usual, the ensemble showed off her black hair with its silver streaks, her jet-black eyes, and her year-round tan. Before my folks started spending winters in Florida, Mom spent many summertime hours holding aluminum foil under her chin to create a tan that lasted through the Michigan winter. My mother's mantra on a woman's appearance was "Do the best with what you have," and she practiced what she preached.

Mom inquired as to our wedding date.

"December 29 of next year," I said, beaming.

"I'll be dead by then," said my seventy-one-year-old mom, demonstrating both her signature optimism and her unflinching ability to make every conversation about her.

“Congratulations!” my blond, blue-eyed, movie-star-handsome father said, raising his cocktail glass in an effort to divert attention from Mom’s prediction.

In the spirit of the evening, I decided not to mention that the shrimp cocktail burned the spot under my tongue.

Two days before Christmas, I was awakened by an automated voice from the Washtenaw County Jail asking if I would accept a call from my never-before-arrested, eighteen-year-old son. Fresh from his first semester at the University of Colorado, Justin and some high school buddies had celebrated their reunion by stealing a few items from an open car. The sunglasses that Justin took were worth more than five dollars, making his crime a felony. We spent Christmas Eve in court where we learned that the case wouldn’t be resolved until March.

The first Gulf War and talk of a draft were looming. While being a felon might keep Justin safe, his twenty-two-year-old brother, Eric, was vulnerable. The war started the day Eric and Justin ended their Christmas visits to return to California and Colorado, respectively. It was harder than usual to watch their tall, lanky frames lope away from me.

I came from a long line of nervous mothers and had always worried about my kids. The oldest daughter, I began my role as a surrogate mom at four when my brother Greg was born. But I had never felt fully up to the job. My sense of being in over my head as a mother, struggling to keep everyone alive, well, and happy, never entirely went away. And these maternal shortcomings were confirmed when Greg took his own life at twenty-nine. Since then I had lived in fear that one of my kids might follow his example. Now, imagining my boys in combat or in jail made it easy to ignore my tongue.

With the holidays behind us, Jeff and I reclaimed our quiet lives in our sprawling house outside Ann Arbor. Less than a year after we met, we had pooled our resources to buy the place, which was so big and beautiful that we were still waiting for the real owners to show up. Evenings often found us soaking in the hot tub, our bodies heated to 104 degrees while our hair and eyebrows were frosted with snow. We held hands and gazed out over our apple orchard, blanketed in white with tiny lights glistening on bare branches. I had never had it so good.

By day, we returned to our careers in the helping professions. I had gone into nursing in large part because Mom wanted to be a nurse, but had never had the money for tuition. Once in the field, I discovered a deep aversion to gore and an even deeper interest in the workings of the human psyche, so specialized in psychiatric nursing. I earned a master's degree at the end of my marriage to Tom and spent a few years as a clinical specialist at the University of Michigan's Children's Psychiatric Hospital. But I felt confined by the structure of the large organization and ventured into business for myself as a therapist, hypnotherapist, speaker, and organizational consultant, becoming the first hypnotherapist in the Ann Arbor phone book.

Jeff had spent most of his career in the business world but now practiced Rolfing, an esoteric form of bodywork that involves aligning the body so it can heal itself. When we first got together, I didn't know much about Rolfing and, wanting to experience my new love's work, I agreed to be Rolfed. Jeff said I screamed louder than any client he'd ever had. But I was impressed. He was very skilled at the physical aspect of the treatments, but what really wowed me was his intuitive understanding of the emotional wounds that were released as he prodded my body into alignment.

During the month of January, I found myself having increasing difficulty concentrating on my job. Sitting in my peach velveteen recliner, listening to a client describe the weight problem she wanted to solve with hypnosis, my mind kept shifting to the pain under my tongue. Standing at the head of a conference table at Children's Hospital of Michigan in my navy suit, my tongue pulled my attention away from a subcommittee report. The pain was becoming undeniable. At the bathroom break, I rushed to the mirror. Was the lesion getting bigger? Was it redder than yesterday? Did it look a little deeper? I couldn't tell, but I knew that I needed to do something about it.

Years later, a malpractice lawyer would inform me that a sore in the mouth should be biopsied if it doesn't heal within seven to ten days. But when I saw my dentist he said, "It's probably just a tooth rubbing on that spot. I wouldn't worry about it."

His hygienist said, “The spot seems to have some white on it. I think I remember hearing something in hygiene school about cancer being white.” Her words made my stomach spasm. I told myself that the dentist was the expert here. I decided to trust him.

And I did, for a while. The pain and the sore remained. So I consulted my chiropractor friend, who cracked my neck and prescribed B vitamins. I called the Unity Church twenty-four-hour prayer hotline and was assured that they would hold my sons and my tongue in prayer for thirty days. I wrote affirmations. I even visited a psychic body worker who put crystals on my chakras and interpreted my symptoms as indicators of past lives. The longer the pain continued in spite of my efforts, the less I was able to convince myself that it wasn't serious.

Toward the end of January, I saw an ear, nose, and throat surgeon who examined the spot and assured me that I didn't have the risk factors for oral cancer. I avoided asking what those factors were, as if being informed might make me more prone to it. “Come back in a month if it isn't gone,” she said, smiling.

During that month, there were wedding plans to be made, and my correspondence with President Bush escalated along with the Gulf War. The list of things I couldn't comfortably eat was growing by the day: salad dressing, orange juice, tomato sauce, mustard, carbonated drinks. It was getting tough to have a conversation without mentioning my tongue. Like me, many of my friends were mental-health types, so theories of causation abounded. “Maybe your tongue is rebelling against saying ‘I do’ again,” one colleague suggested. Another therapist friend, who knew that accessing and expressing anger weren't my strong suits, reminded me that repressed anger can cause illness. Someone else suspected family dynamics. Did I need to stand up to my mother? And what about my father, who was so seldom home when I was little that I really didn't know him? I had seen plenty of clients with physical issues rooted in their childhoods. Was my problem a metaphor for my neglected inner child biting her tongue? My new friend Sandy, a brilliant, dynamic woman who I'd met through my organizational development work, was in close contact with her rambunctious inner child. She'd named her Magic. Both Sandy and Magic wanted

my inner child to come out and play. I found this all pretty silly but wanted to impress Sandy. Besides, if such a smart, successful woman needed to heal her inner child, I didn't have to be embarrassed about looking for mine. I read lots of John Bradshaw, watched videos on reclaiming your wounded inner child, and wrote with my left hand so "little Terri" could express herself. She didn't have much to say.

While I was busy plumbing my depths, one of my prayers was answered! The Gulf War ended. Knowing that my sons had been spared left me more time to obsess about my tongue. As far back as I could remember, the minute one worry was resolved, another popped up. The familiar toxic voice in my head was never at a loss for something to fear. Now it reminded me that it had been a month since that surgeon told me to come back if the spot didn't disappear. It hadn't, so I did. She said, "I think the lesion looks better."

I went to Jeff for a second opinion. He had a way of comforting me that I called our "You'll be fine" game. Whenever I felt afraid, I explained my fear to Jeff ending with, "But I'll be okay, right?" And he had to answer, "Yes, you'll be fine." While I knew that he couldn't see the future any better than I could, I somehow trusted his intuition more than my own. Even outside his Rolfling office, Jeff's intuitive powers had always dazzled me.

When we first started dating, I was eager to introduce my handsome new beau to all of my friends. Jeff showed an uncanny ability to read deep aspects of their characters after only brief or superficial interactions. I was very attracted to the possibility that someone might finally understand me. His depth was all the more appealing because my most recent husband, Michael, hadn't been at all interested in delving under the surface of things. Looking back, I suspect that Jeff understood me better than I understood myself.

But today he wasn't saying I'd be fine. Jeff was deep into a video game when I found him. He peered into my mouth and said, "I don't know. It looks about the same to me."

"Not what I want to hear," I said, sounding tough but shaking inside.

"I think you should see another doctor." I wanted to hear that even less, but I saw the fear in his eyes. A few months before we met, Jeff's

wife of twenty-three years had died suddenly of unknown causes at the age of forty-three. He didn't want to take any chances with me.

"What about Dennis?" Jeff asked, referring to a colleague of his.

I made an appointment with Dennis Talley, an MD with a master's degree in public health and training in homeopathy. Dennis blends traditional with complementary medicine, and brilliance with humility. A recovering hippie, he has long gray-brown hair, a wild beard, and a spare frame. Dennis was that rare doctor who could use the words "I," "don't," and "know" in the same sentence.

"I don't know what it is, Terri," Dennis said. "But if I were you, I'd get it biopsied."

Two weeks later I sat in the oral surgeon's waiting room, silently chanting prayers and inspirational messages. *I'm sure this is nothing. No big deal. It'll be great to have it settled.*

"This needs to be biopsied," the surgeon said.

My heart thumped hard against my chest. "I have to give a speech in Kansas City on Thursday. Then I'm going to Boulder to visit my son."

"I don't care about speeches and trips," he said. "Get it biopsied *now*."

I took the first available appointment and sped across town to Jeff's office.

"He says it has to be biopsied right away and I can tell he thinks it's really bad cancer and I hate all those assholes who have told me it was nothing," I blurted. I felt a sudden rush of anger, which was soon supplanted by fear.

Jeff gave me a quick hug. I wanted him to hold me longer, but his body was as stiff as mine. His voice tightened as he spoke. "Slow down. We don't know anything for sure. Just breathe."

"I have clients to see in an hour."

"You're in no shape for that," Jeff said gently. "Let me call and cancel your appointments."

"Oh no, you can't do that. They count on me." My mind raced. "Who knows how long I'll be able to work? We'll need money for medical bills."

"Your clients will understand. Forget about money right now," Jeff said calmly. "Let's cancel our sessions and go get coffee."

We sat at a round table in my favorite café, avoiding each other's eyes. Sipping my latte, I automatically assessed its impact on the spot under my tongue. Then I realized it was no longer up to me to diagnose the problem. Having medical science involved made the whole thing so much more real. This wasn't just my imagination, and it was probably going to take more than positive thinking to make it go away.

I caught Jeff staring at me. "What are you thinking?" I asked. I wondered if he felt like bolting before he had another dead wife on his hands.

"I was remembering what the dentist said about your tooth rubbing your tongue. And the ENT said it looked better. They could still be right." I appreciated his attempt to reassure me, but it wasn't working.

I had a week to get through before my biopsy. My keynote speech for the American Association of Diabetic Educators had been on the books for months. It took me days to crank up the nerve to cancel and even longer to call Eric and Justin. I asked Jeff to tell my sons that I might have cancer, and then I chatted with them as if it were no big deal.

My younger sister Valerie, who swings into action in a crisis, insisted that I get a second opinion from James Dudar, an ENT acquaintance of hers at the University of Michigan. Jeff came with me. "Terri White?" said a deep voice in a big hurry. "I'm Dr. Dudar."

We followed his white coat into an examining room, where he waved me into an unyielding stainless-steel chair, then stomped on a foot pedal, elevating me in jerky increments. He yanked my mouth open, scanned the spot in question, and spoke without hesitation.

"If it were my mouth, I'd have surgery and radiation. It's likely to recur, and you want to take every precaution," he said.

A thunderous screeching began in my head, drowning out the doctor's words. This icy man was, without benefit of a biopsy, telling me that I had cancer. Serious cancer that surgery alone couldn't cure. Cancer so bad that it would likely come back. How could this be obvious to him, when so many others had missed it? I tried to convince myself that he didn't know what he was talking about.

Years later, I learned that while I was tuning him out, Dr. Dudar told Jeff that if my cancer ever did recur, I would have a 2 percent