

6. HYPOCHONDRIA

Today I ate a slice of pizza and a coke. I felt like I was blowing up like a blimp. Oh God. My body was again out of control. I ran to the bathroom to have a look in the mirror. I was expecting one of those fun house images. I was going to get punished again for my raging appetite. But I looked OK. No more cokes for me. I guess that it was just a flashback to worse times.

When I was thirteen, I was a real mess. Every second I had some new ailment. And my night table was full of prescriptions. It started with something real. I got mono in February. It was raining a lot. I had a pile of tests. And I was up all night studying. Hardly eating. I felt as if my face was being pricked with little needles. It was so weird.

“You’re not eating a thing,” Hazel admonished me. She was really working her job as a nurse on me.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Are you sick?” She touched my forehead. “You feel as if you have a fever.”

She pulled out the thermometer. But I seemed to be all right. Still I was really tired. I slept through my alarm the next day.

“You better get up or you’re going to miss class,” Hazel screamed at me.

I could hardly move. Maybe the zombies had finally caught up with me.

“I can’t get up.”

“You were up all night working. But you have to get up. You can’t miss school.”

“I feel sick.”

Like last night, she again took my temperature. No fever.

“You’re OK. You have to go to school.”

She forced me into the shower. I perked up a little.

I got driven to school. I slithered into my first class. And I braced myself on my desk.

“Haley, are you doing all right?”

“Yes, Ms. Johnson!”

I had no idea how I was holding up as long as I was. Whatever I did, I wanted to avoid pulling Hazel out of work. I would never hear the end of it.

I was sure that I actually slept in all through my first class. I awoke with that funny taste in my mouth. Second hour math was more of a chore. I couldn’t let myself give in. But my calculations were dancing on the page.

“How am I going to make any sense of this if you don’t sit still?”

As I zoned out, my pencil just ran down the paper. The teacher found me slumped on the desk.

“I know that you must have had a rough night watching cartoons, but my class requires full attention.”

I looked up, “I think that I’m sick, Mr. Evans.”

“You should go see the nurse.”

In my altered state, I thought that he wanted me to see Hazel, “Yeah, she’s a nurse. But I’ll be OK without her.”

He went back to the lesson and ignored me. I pretended that I was following him.

However, my eyes soon closed.

Between math and science, I had a coughing fit. But I was ready to go by the time that Ms. Benson walked in. She was teaching us about ecology. I kept staring in front of me.

“Haley, do you have something to say?”

I just wanted to babble in front of everyone. No words came out.

Ms. Benson had accustomed herself to the rudeness of the other students. So she filed my rudeness under such behavior. She didn't pay any attention to me for the rest of the period. At the end, she walked over to talk to me.

“Haley, you're not your lively self today.”

“I'm a little sick.”

“Hope, you're better tomorrow. Maybe you should leave early. You really are looking under the weather. Let me see if you have a fever.”

I put up my hand to block hers. I didn't want to deal with Hazel. “I'm going to get a ride home after next period.”

That wasn't entirely accurate. But I needed to throw her off for the time being.

“I can always take you to the nurse if you really need help.”

“Thanks, Ms. Benson.”

I survived the final few periods of class. It's amazing how little that you actually have to do to get by in school. You can hibernate in the back of class, and they usually leave you alone. Of course, school had never seemed like such a prison sentence in quite a well.

On most days that Hazel worked late, I would go to a friend's house until she got off. More recently, I'd just bike home on my own. I'd only be alone for a few hours before she arrived home. Today was different. She had taken to me to school. I was sure that she didn't want to leave early. That had been my whole struggle all day long. Now was hardly different. But as everyone else streamed out of class, I was running out of options.

“Haley, what are you still doing at school? I was sure that you were going to go see the nurse.”

I looked up. It was Ms. Johnson. I tried to make a quick excuse, “I forgot.”

“So are you waiting for a ride.”

I nodded my head.

“You better be certain because I'm going to wait with you.”

“I'm going to be a little while. Hazel had to stay late at work.”

“Oh!” She needed to take a second to figure out that I called Hazel by her first name.

“Well, if you have to wait around, I can drop you at your place. Then you can call your.. Er, Hazel.”

Ms. Johnson pulled up to my driveway and helped me out of the car, “You are warm.” She touched my forehead. “You have a fever.”

“Hazel's a nurse. I'll be in good hands.”

I wasn't sure what Hazel would really say when she got home. I needed to call her to tell her not to get me at school.

“Well, Haley. I'll see you tomorrow at school.”

When I got in, I just fell on the couch from exhaustion. I was feeling hot. I didn't know how I had made it through the day. I was a lot worse than I thought I was, and a million times

worse than Hazel gave me credit for.

Bill actually made it home before Hazel.

“Haley, you don’t look well.” He touched my forehead. “You do have a fever. Let me get a thermometer.”

It came in at 101 degrees.

“You’ll have to scurry on up to bed.”

I could hardly say anything. He just carried me upstairs.

When Hazel came home, she looked in on me.

“You could have called me at school. I would have left work early to come get you.”

She meant nothing of the kind. Even if the thermometer had registered 101, she wanted to do her best to deny that I was sick. For the time being, she held her tongue. She did a few things to help out, the she added in her inimitable style,

“You’ll be raring to go in the morning.”

I felt as if I should salute her. I didn’t have the extra energy to mock her. Before she was out the door, I went out like a light.

I tried to get up in the middle of the night. My legs were wobbly. I searched for something to hold on to. I reached the wall, but my hand just slid down it, and I fell. I tried to pick myself up, but I was too weak. I didn’t want to wake up Hazel. I did what I could to make it back to the bed. I still had to get myself inside.

Try as I might, I didn’t have the strength to get back in the bed. There was no way to lift myself up. I pulled down the bed clothes, and the pillow came with it. I slept on the floor.

Hazel saw me in the morning, “Is this some new kind of thing?”

I wasn’t sure what to tell her. “The bed seemed too soft. I thought that I would get more support if I was on the floor.”

“I hoped that it worked, because it’s time for school.”

“Of course!”

I was no stronger than I was last night. I just hadn’t realized that my sleep hadn’t improved my condition. Luckily I was able to prop myself up. I really looked as if I was going to make it. But I came right down, and fortunately the pillow broke my fall. Hazel rushed in the room when she heard a noise.

“What happened in here?”

I had my answer ready, “I tried a handstand, and I just fell on my ass.”

“That may be sort of cute. But you’re going to get ready for school.”

“I would if I could stand up.”

She tried to help me up, but I just collapsed in her arms. She became a little angry, “You have to get going. I’m going to be late for work.”

She didn’t want to admit that I was sick. I was still running a temperature. I was coughing. She just believed that her miraculous touch could raise me from the dead. It wasn’t going to happen.

Hazel looked at me lying on the floor, “Let me help you up to the bed. I’ll finish getting dressed and check in on you.”

She was having difficulty admitting that I was sick. I had been so healthy, and this always seemed to confirm her view of the world. She really couldn’t face the facts, but I had

evolved into a superior strain of daughter. At this moment, we both had to recognize the limits of our ambitions. I was down for the count.

If she was going to play nurse, she wanted to share as little sympathy as possible with me. She knew how it might seem if she seemed totally ruthless so she dispensed barely the right amount of kindness from the bottle. Blankets, some fluids, a cold compress to bring down the fever, and some Tylenol for the inflammation. Her professional manner told her that she could do it all herself. No doctor would be needed to complete the diagnosis.

She held a thermometer about me, "Looks like a major case of the flu."

Hazel wasn't going to apologize for doubting me. She had to cast herself as if she was right all the time.

"You did look a little peeked around the gills."

Whatever did that mean?

She continued her revisionism, "I did everything to warn you to take it easy."

It was only yesterday that she had sent me to school. She pushed me every second along the way. Failure was not a word in her lexicon. And she had done such a great job in tailoring the reality to meet her vision of things.

To add insult to injury, she agreed to check on me during her lunch hour. She needed convincing evidence that she indeed was the concerned parent.

Fortunately, she helped me to the bathroom. And when I made it back to the bed, I went out like a light. That made it a lot easier for her to carry on with her pain. If I didn't die while she was at work, she'd come out of this with flying colors.

"It's a damn case of the flu. What do you want? A medal. You don't know how many times that I've gone to work sick as dog just so you can have money to buy CD's for yourself. You're a spoiled brat!"

Of course, I was the one who was barely awake and could hardly hear her words. But I knew by their infectious rhythms exactly what they meant.

Hazel wanted thought of asking someone to come look after me. I protested that I could take care of myself. However, I could hardly move. By the time that we were through talking about it, she was almost late. She ended up repeating her commitment to come look in on me.

After she left, I slept some more. This time I actually was in the bed. I had no desire to get up. When Hazel returned at midday, I had barely noticed that she was gone. She did a few things to mother. She helped me take a shower. Then I slid back to bed.

"Maybe I could set you up in the living room. You could watch some TV."

Nothing appealed to me. I just wanted to sleep. Since I was slightly mobile, she took this as a sign of improvement.

"I'll be back before you know it." She didn't really mean it that way, but in my condition, that was exactly how it turned out.

For her part, she felt that I only deserved so much sick time. I had already pushed it to the limit, so her expectation was for a quick recovery. If she could get me out of the house tomorrow morning, she would get the medal for services rendered. I would simply be her project for that day, and there would be no reward due my efforts.

Despite being a nurse, Hazel seem easily eluded by the mysteries of biology. A cure was hardly imminent. Her concern seemed like so much mumbo jumbo before what was really ailing

me. But she clung to her diagnosis as long as she possibly could.

I don't want to accuse her of being a terrible parent. She wasn't abusing me. She cared for my needs as well as she could, but she didn't want to come out of that shell of hers. I didn't want to shake her out of it, not at this point when I didn't have the strength to stand up.

Bill followed her lead. He thought if he got in her way that she would accuse him of meddling. He didn't always approve of her severity, but he envisioned himself as too busy with the demands of work to face her head on. I am sure that he wanted to cheat her method now and then. And he tried to find the time for me. But she was wary of any interference with her God-endowed plan for child-rearing.

I suspected that their devotion to TV might ebb due to their concern for their daughter. Instead, it was the medicine to make them immune from whatever might be ailing me. Down deep, Hazel was convinced that I had given in to an inferior ideology. She had this image of countries with socialized medicine who seemed intentionally to spread disease. That was all the more reason that America needed to guard against anyone who wanted to water down its superior lifestyle.

She should have called a doctor. She knew enough. She could have even had someone stop by the house. But Hazel had a natural suspicion of doctors. She thought that they were elitist. By resisting their opinion, she felt as if she could outmaneuver them and confront whatever was affecting me. With her own eyes, she had seen the thermometer. She knew I was sick. And she dealt with illness all the time. I knew that wanted to blame me for what was happening. As she watched TV, she was going through the game book in her mind and trying to determine where I had gone wrong. Until she got to that point, she didn't want to consult another opinion.

I knew that I was fighting something beyond my power to resist. I needed help at that moment. She wasn't going to leave me to die or anything. She was just delaying in getting me the necessary treatment. If it was only the flu, then it would be OK to wait for the morning. And it was evident that I would survive the night. A little quicker reaction was in store.

It would have been a rougher night if I had been awake. I had stomach pains. But these were temporary. The Tylenol did help with the pain. And the fever was brought down a little by morning. But there was no doubt at that point how severe things had gotten. There was no alternative but to see a doctor.

Early in the morning Bill and Hazel went with me to the hospital. Hazel had arranged everything so that I didn't have to wait to see a doctor. He took some blood tests and checked a few other things.

We all sat in the waiting room to hear about the tests. Bill sat with me while Hazel paced up and down.

"Bill, do you want more coffee.?"

"I'm OK."

She brought me an orange juice. It perked me up a little. The doctor saw us about an hour later.

"Haley had a case of mono. She seems pretty strong. You're going to have to keep her home for a few days. I'll give you a couple of prescriptions. One is for the congestion. Another is to bring that fever down. Let me see you at the beginning of next week."

Things had been taken out of Hazel's hands. She hated that. But this was what she went through every day. Even now she was trying to find some in to support her point of view. As a child, Hazel had her own history of illness. It had prompted her to become a nurse. She was determined to use that history against me. It was almost as if I was being interrogated by the intelligence service of the FBI. She was ready to match her DNA against mine. Ready to offer samples of her own blood against mine. What had first started out as an argument against my illness had now turned into a battle over whose story was more pertinent to the present situation. After all, I had been diagnosed with mono. She just wanted to keep her own experience central to everything that went on in this house.

"I've been sick all my life. But has it ever stopped me from going to work."

"I couldn't go to school if I wanted to."

"I'm not denying that. But you reached this state because you're too soft. If you had fought the illness early on, you wouldn't be in this condition."

Her arguments belied the facts. But that didn't stop her from advancing her position with such vehemence. It was an emotional strategy that she had picked up from Fox News. It started with an effort to deny your opponent's argument at every step of the way even if the facts were against you. Even when the facts became so overwhelming that it was impossible to deny, you tried to move on to some new subject so your loss of face would never seem too great. This may have been OK to do in a political discussion. But I was her own daughter. I hadn't done a thing. However, that was always the intent of Fox, to ravage the home front.

Hazel had already made her point. If she was going to allow me to be treated for mono, she was going to do it begrudgingly. And each element of my treatment was going to be dished out piecemeal. There was going to be nothing of holistic medicine in her approach. All the while that she was treating my physical ailments, she implied that my mind had been delivered to the forces of evil, and she was going to get rid of every progressive inclination in my body.

I didn't even bother trying to fight her. She claimed victory in the battle over my body. If that's how she wanted it to be, that was OK for now.

My fever had a strange way of acting on the mind. At first, my will tried to resist its effects. I tried to stay awake and alert. I focused my attention on a single object, like a lamp in my room. This was supposed to give me confidence. Instead, the object became blurred. I thought that I was seeing something else, a bird. And my concentration would slip and the imagined bird would take flight, and I would be carried along by it.

The more that this happened, I found that I was giving over to the delirium. As I became light-headed, I tried to get my bearings. I would be fooled into these lull of certainty. It was all becoming a dream within a dream. Any attempt to right myself plunged me deeper into the abyss.

Part of me found a hidden pleasure in what was going on. The feverish effects gave me an almost perverse delight. This bordered on euphoria. It was as if I was given a narcotic for my sickness. This happened even before I was prescribed any drugs so it was clearly the effects of the illness.

I fell so deeply into a stupor that I wondered if I would ever come out. I knew that I was not near death, but I wondered what more it would take to finally bring a body down. I was limp on the bed, unable to move a muscle. What will I had surrendered to the force of the disease.

I recognized that I would be incapacitated for days. Bill and Hazel agreed to split watch

until the fever had past. Then one of them would come home at lunch to check on me. The illness afforded me a new way to see my body. I dispensed with the influence of the will. But it was replaced by a field of sensation. This cloud of experience blurred into my dreams and thoughts and visions. I was traveling in his zone of impressions, floating in a nether world. Perhaps the drugs were interacting with the fever. My body was somewhat numbed. The pain was only intermittent. The cough subsided. There was still a general weakness, but it made little difference as I did nothing to tax my body. I just gave into the energies that pulsed through my body. Through the movements and counter-movements, I discovered a tranquility that was greater than any enjoyment that I had known before. I was still sick. I couldn't act on my feeling. I couldn't write about it. It really had no story to accompany it. No record of what was going on. But it was the perfect now. It seemed to ward off anything that might want to harm.

There was a disease in my body, but I had discovered a contentment of the soul. In a way, I left the body behind and went to a new place. I embraced what was there. I wished that I could take something back from my journey. There was an aching that filled me, a desire to touch something more real. For the time being, this was totally sufficient.

Paradise can make us bored after a while. I was still unable to concentrate to watch TV. It would have been almost torture to have the images before me. So I remained within the world of my soul. I felt gratified in this condition.

By the end of the weekend, the strength was beginning to return to my muscles. I could comfortably get out of bed. I could walk to the kitchen and get food. There were the outlines of an appetite that was returning to me. I hadn't eaten much in days, only soups and other liquids. It felt great to actually digest solid food.

My emergence into the world of the living was gradual. I had a lot of work to catch up on at school. My endurance was very limited. I'd push myself and then have to retreat. I lived just on the edge of a relapse. My recovery moved so hesitantly.

Back in school, I remained an observer about what was going on. Even when people talked to me, I felt as if I was hardly there. I longed to get back home where I could relax in the comfort of the living room couch. I could hardly displace the role of Fox News so I needed to plan my time. I started to watch TV more in my room. I didn't want to become some kind of shut-in so I spent time in the other rooms of the house. After my illness, my room felt a little dreary so I worked to limit my time in there to a minimum.

It took well over a month until I was back to anything resembling my normal self. By that time, I was back to riding my bike. I was building up my strength, but I had none of the resilience that I had become accustomed to. No matter, I used the changes in my body as a new way of defining myself. I didn't embrace illness, but I was ready for some new eruption to throw me for a curve. I'd progress in stops and starts.

If I felt too tired, I wouldn't push things. This approach was totally at odds with Hazel's view of the world. If we had butted heads in the past, this became a source of further enmity between us. I did everything that I could to keep out of her way. She felt as if she had suffered a major defeat in battle, and she wasn't going to admit to failure. Her eyes were constantly open to the least infractions on my part.

When she thought that I was feigning illness, she would hit the roof. But my weakened state became my only way to assert my personality within these confines. I had found the one

path that was totally antithetical to hers. It was not so much a lethargy, but more of a refusal to submit to her regimen. She knew that the actual course of my illness made it more difficult to use her arguments against me. She still made faces when she could. And she'd drop the rudest comments when it suited her.

I feared that I was turning inward without any real human contact. If my illness could be prolonged for further sympathy, who could I really affect with my performance. I was my own audience as sickness artist. I didn't want to hurt. I didn't want to bleed. I took no risks against my person. I just let down my defenses. I gave in to the feeling.

I wasn't the classic hypochondriac. I didn't have my purse full of medicines. And I would have avoided any sort of tranquilizers at all cost. I just felt that I was always on the verge of passing out. I used this as the perfect pose at moments of stress. That is not to say that I sought out stress. Part of my condition meant that I had to reduce the stimulation in my environment. I was always resting up for some nasty event in the future. If my total health was beyond my control, I admitted to being a little bit of a fatalist.

I didn't want to think of myself as a potential hospital patient. I didn't want to end up in a premature grave. I just gave myself license that I never had before. This co-ordinated well with the strictness of Hazel. I was becoming victorious within myself.

I became obsessed with every detail of my own health. I felt as if my body was preparing itself for some kind of final exam. And the well-being of the planet depended on the varieties of input and output that fed into the biological system. I found myself monitoring my trips to the bathroom as I as planning the invasion of Europe.

My body was starting to become something other. I tried to keep up with the change, but it had nothing to do with me. I could feel that I was splitting in two. One part observed what was going on. She was the scientist. The other part was taken on the ride, the roller coaster. I felt the highs whip me around. I cherished the lows so that I could recover from the turbulence around me.

I still rode my bike all the time. I wanted to assert my old strength. But inside the house, I could feel the walls closing in on me. I battled with myself whether I wanted to go to school or stay in bed all day. Hazel tried to impose herself in this personal contest of the wills. But this had nothing to do with her. I was going to do what I wanted. If I needed, I probably could have brought a fever on by a sheer application of my mind. I was finding strength in my own weakness.

The house was becoming mine. Even as the TV blared in the living room, I found space that resisted Hazel's fury. I played my own music, and it had a pace and flavor that overcame anything else that buzzed around it.

Hazel didn't realize what she had lost. She continued to review the pronouncement of Fox News to help her in her daily routine. Even when things were not going so well in the world, the news had a way of convincing her that she was right. She had made it such a failing to slow down that there was so much that she missed that was going on around her.

I could hardly rescue her. I didn't want to become embroiled in a World War with someone who had no idea what were the limits of her own hubris. The announcers of Fox only made her more puffed up about her point of view. If she had no one to argue with, her frustrations mounted. But she was powerless.

I took a renewed interest in Ms. Benson's discussion of ecology. I was creating my own habitat. This supported many of the ideas that she advanced regarding adaptation. I considered the effects of a single organism that was adapting much faster than anything else around it. That was my situation. I was the experimental subject in my own biological experiment.

My new understandings offered me a way to consider myself beyond illness. I was putting aside the hypochondria. There was still a little medicine that remained in the cabinet from my time with mono. I took out each bottle and studied it. I looked up each pill and learned about its effects. My science was no longer limited to the weaknesses of the body. My body was finding new techniques to live in my world. And I was changing my world to give me the opportunity to develop new abilities.

When my strength finally returned, I looked on my time with mono as only a small part of who I was. But without the changes that it wrought, I never would have developed this new perspective.

I did everything that I could to escape the restrictions imposed by my illness. I had discovered a mystery that it was difficult to share with anyone else. I didn't want to give in to my isolation, but it had held me in good stead during my disease.

I was facing a new limitation to my experience. I started to see being alone as a new kind of illness. I didn't feel that I needed to talk to anyone about my feelings. Things just seemed strange. I thought that no one else had undergone this kind of transformation. One day I tried to explain it to Ms. Benson.

"I've never been sick like that," she told me. "I had the flu a few times. I've had a few broken bones. But nothing that serious."

"I felt as if I was turning into a new kind of being.

As a science teacher, she wanted to dismiss my idea as the stuff of fiction. She wasn't trying to mock me. "Is this the kind of the thing that they describe in comic books?"

I didn't want to make light of her attempt. "A little bit. But it wasn't as if I was hit by radiation and mutated into some kind of monster."

"I wasn't suggesting that."

I wanted to explore this more. "You know how you talk about how an animal creates a biological map of its environment. That is what happened to me. But it went further. I was remapping my mind to go along with that."

"I'm having trouble following!"

I explained, "When I had a fever, I could sense that I was traveling in space. It was almost mystical. In a way, my mind was evolving. I was transforming my image of the world. And once I changed the way that I saw the world, I worked to change my environment."

"How?"

"It's like a married couple who buy a suite of furniture for their living room. They bring their childhood memories. But they also have their own ideas of what they want for their house. I did that sort of the thing."

"You bought furniture."

"Not exactly. But my habits changed. I spent more time in different rooms of the house. I spent time in the park. I went to the library. I started to see my world in a different way."

"Go on!. I'm starting to see a little better."

I was excited. This was my new art, “I changed my environment, and my mind started to change in response to that change.”

“I guess that’s what the Greeks meant by the thinking animal.”

“Exactly. But the thoughts were directly related to the sense of proportion in the room.”

She seemed to take an interest in my idea.

“You could create a model of your living spaces. We did the same thing for the cheetah. You could describe Haley in the wild.”

I smiled. She seemed to take a real interest in what had happened to me. I’m sure that she couldn’t understand everything that I talked about. Some of it seemed to go beyond science into something more mystical. I considered what were the limits of my evolution.

In contemplating my change, I still had to factor in the influence of Bill and Hazel. If I had told them about my ideas, they would have thought that I was on drugs. Too much thinking frightened them. That’s what Hazel said to me one day. Bill was even more specific.

“If you can’t make money with an idea, what good is it?”

He probably could never understand the magnificence of Greece and Egypt, how all their culture was driven by a thirst for knowledge. He’d be the one at the back of the tourist line wondering where he could score a hamburger.

I needed to push on with my ideas. I designed my diorama for class that captured all the details of my habitat. I even had a little figure who was supposed to be me. I should have depicted myself as some kind of animal, perhaps a panther who was loose in the house. Watch out Bill and Hazel, I’m coming to eat you!

The illness had demonstrated the degree to which Bill and Hazel had become obsessed with their own zombie nature. I hated to be so reductive about their lives, but they seemed to have truly devolved. In their resistance to Darwin, they had reversed the process of development. As a joke, I told myself that Hazel was conducting scientific experiments at the hospital to continue this kind of reversal on other people. The idea was not so far-fetched as this was the very strategy of Fox.

On the other hand, I had stepped into another realm of being. And it made it harder and harder to deal with their strict ideology. They hated it if I showed them any contrary evidence to what they heard on the news. It was never based on anything resembling scientific method.

“What do you know? You’re still in the eighth grade. I’m a nurse. I’ve seen science in action.”

But that was never what was shown on television. So-called experts tried to dismiss climate change. Or contradict the evident facts of evolution. And there was such an effort to offer negative images of people from diverse cultures. Mexicans were always portrayed as criminals fleeing from the border patrol. Screaming anchors accompanied such images with disparaging comments about lazy people. Economic deprivation was never a suitable image for Fox News. If it was ever shown, it was the result of an uncontrollable natural disaster. Or due to the criminality of the individuals.

What did I know? Enough to write a book. I was the new Darwin on his Galapagos Island. Now I observed the inhabitants of Roswell. I described their habitat. I examined their genealogies. I documented the species.

I also took it to the next step. I pushed for further adaptation of my species. And in so

doing, I felt that I was becoming a new person. I had held on to my hypochondria as a way of dealing with the changes around me. Now I went further. I stepped into the darkness so that I could light up the future.

This was going beyond science. I was engaged in a creative struggle. I wanted to make some kind of record of my research. But I wanted to do it in a way that Bill and Hazel couldn't figure out what I was doing. More than ever, it was a question of redesigning my being to reflect my new understanding. It was almost as if I was tampering with my dreams, remaking my brain chemistry.

Whew! This all seemed so silly. I wanted some guidance to make sense of it all. Ms Benson had understood a few details of my project. But she couldn't make sense of it all. Maybe I was getting carried away.

After class, I jumped on my bike and headed to the park. I watched the ants gather under a tree. Their purpose seemed so directed. Many times humans are caught up in just this sort of pursuit. At other times, they act so differently; they can wander. They can avoid anything of purpose. This seemed fascinating.

Bill and Hazel would consider such behavior slothful. They would never appreciate the true sense of exploration. It made sense to them that Columbus would come to the Americas to help expand the Spanish Empire. But they didn't appreciate the sense of the step into the unknown. And they mocked those who talked about the brutality inherent in the European subjugation of the indigenous people.

My illness taught me a deeper truth. The self was the land that I was ready to explore!