

an eighty-year-old woman with severe heart disease? But it was her wish and so we continued, a few steps at a time. She may have had angina but she also had an iron will. I think half of New York must have passed us on those stairs.

Finally, unbelievably, we were six or seven steps from the top. As we stood there taking what must have been our three-hundredth time-out, my mother eyed the last few steps between her and her goal with resentment. "Why," she said, "couldn't we have done these first?"

In thinking of this story now, I remember all the times that I too have resented the climb, the amount of living needed to gain the precious understanding to know how to live well. And how important it is in the struggle for freedom from the old ways not to be limited by style or self-expectations or to worry about what others may think. To be willing to do the really important things any way you can, even three steps at a time.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN

MY BACKYARD ON the slopes of Mount Tamalpais in Northern California is actually a very small meadow. In the summer and fall of every year a stag visits at dawn and at twilight. This is quite a thing for someone who grew up in Manhattan. This year he has six points on his antlers. Last year five or perhaps four. He is heart-stopping.

Actually, I did not plan to have a stag, I planned to have a rose garden. The year after I moved here, I planted fifteen rose-bushes, gifts from my friends. It was a lot of hard work, but I could see it in my mind's eye. Just like in *Sunset* magazine. The roses bloomed in the late spring and for a month the garden was glorious. Then the roses started disappearing. Puzzled, I eventually realized that something larger than aphids was eating them and became determined to catch it in the act. Getting up one

dawn and glancing out the window, I was transfixed by seeing the stag for the first time. He looked like an illustration from one of my childhood books. As I watched in awe he unhurriedly crossed the yard, browsed for a while among the roses, and then delicately ate one of my Queen Elizabeths.

Every year since then I have had to make a difficult choice. Am I going to put up higher fences and have roses, or am I going to have a stag ten feet from my back door? Every year so far, I have chosen the stag. After two years of watching each other through a pane of glass, I can now sit outside as he dines.

If I tell people this, some say in disbelief, "You mean that you are letting this deer eat your roses?" Sometimes I will invite someone like this over to watch. One friend, stunned into silence by the sight, said simply, "Well, I guess we are always doing the right things for the wrong reasons." I had thought I was planting rosebushes in order to have roses. It now seems I was actually planting rosebushes in order to have half an hour of silence with this magical animal every morning and every evening.

One of my patients, a woman with ovarian cancer, told me this: "Before I got sick, I was very certain of everything. I knew what I wanted and when I wanted it. Most of the time I knew what I had to do to get it too. I walked around with my hand outstretched saying, 'I want an apple.' Many times life would give me a pomegranate instead. I was always so disappointed that I never looked at it to see what it was. Actually, I don't think I could have seen what it was. I had the world divided up into just two categories: 'apple' and 'not-apple.' If it wasn't an apple, it was only a not-apple. I had 'apple eyes.'"

Embracing life is actually a choice. When asked to describe

her husband, another of my patients, laughing, tells this story about a visit to Hawaii that has become part of her family's mythology. An organized and frugal man, her husband had reserved compact rental cars on each of the four islands months in advance. On arriving on the Big Island and presenting their reservation to the car rental desk, they were told that the economy car they had reserved was not available. Alarmed, she watched her husband's face redden as he prepared to do battle. The clerk did not seem to notice. "I am so sorry, sir," he said. "Will you accept a substitute for the same price? We have a Mustang convertible." Barely mollified, her husband put their bags in this beautiful white sports car and they drove off.

The same thing happened throughout their holiday. They would turn in their car and fly to the next island, only to be told that the car they had been promised was not available and offered a same-price substitution. It was amazing, she said. After the Mustang, they had been given a Mazda MR-10, a Lincoln Town Car, and finally, a Mercedes, all with the most sincere apologies. The vacation was absolutely wonderful and on the plane back, she turned to her husband, thanking him for all he had done to arrange such a memorable time. "Yes," he said, pleased, "it was really nice. Too bad they never had the right car for us." He was absolutely serious.