

IN THE RESTAURANT

Ellen T McKnight

She crosses her arms, pale blue-veined hands gripping her black sleeves, and leans toward me over the white pressed tablecloth. It's back, she says. The waiter brings the wine, peels off the foil, sinks the silver blade down to release the cork, then pours. The leukemia, she says, and with my heart, well The busboy sets down a basket of warm French bread that I can't seem to smell. So no more chemo – they'll try transfusions. The doctor says three or four months. With a flourish, the waiter sets down two shiny plates of beige-colored food with a sprig of green and beams at us. We both nod, then watch as he whisks himself away. She takes the sprig between two fingers, drops it on the tablecloth, then wipes her fingertips in two straight lines along the side of her plate. I'm neutropenic now, so nothing raw. No hugs, she says. And I lean back and try to keep my breath from touching hers, cross my arms to capture my hug.