

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 29
Issue 4 *December*

Article 10

December 1993

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 29, no.4, December 1993, p.342-344

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All the Way

by NANCY MAIRS

WHEN I MET Susan Kenney, I had no idea that I would need this stranger from Maine and her husband. She and I were speakers at a conference called “Literary Women” in Long Beach, California, a pleasant event, well organized and well attended, but not the sort at which I’d have expected to meet a spiritual guide, if indeed I’d thought myself in the market for guidance, which I didn’t. In my experience, if you like the company of the people you’re thrown together with for the duration of a conference, in this case only about twenty-four hours, you’re well enough off. You certainly don’t expect to carry them around in your head and your heart forever after.

I liked Susan. Over dinner, when I mentioned the melanoma that had been removed from my husband’s arm a year or so earlier, she responded warmly and reassuringly out of her own experience. I was impressed and perhaps a little abashed. Ed’s was clearly a major illness, one that sounded likely to culminate in death, whereas George had merely had an ugly mole excised, the odds twenty to one that the problem would never recur. The relief I felt at the comparison seems now to have been tinged with smugness, but if Susan glimpsed this, she didn’t try to disabuse me of it. She’d had plenty of time to learn, as I would later, that cancer arouses a dizzying repertoire of responses, some more agreeable than others but none susceptible to admonishment.

I had a “real,” though temporary, teaching job for once, at UCLA, and feeling a little flush, I bought books by all the conference presenters. At home, still overstimulated by the manic sociability such a gathering imposes, I decided I’d read a bit of *In Another Country* before trying to sleep. I stayed awake until I finished it. I think I’d have done so regardless of my own relationship—still so loose in my mind—to cancer. It’s simply a wonderful book, resonant with wry details of the ordinary life that insists on being carried out under even the most strange and stunning conditions. It is the old dog who has stayed with me: the way Sara, hanging on to her composure in the face of Phil’s quite possible death only to crumple when she needs to decide whether to put Collie Cibber down, embodies perfectly the cranky machinations of the human psyche.

Less than three months later, having had my fill of commuter marriage and returned to Tucson to begin a new book, I found myself at George’s bedside as he recovered from surgery to remove the lymph nodes under his right arm, one of which was telltale black. We’d lost the numbers game. When Susan read about

this relapse, in a piece I wrote for the “Hers” column in *The New York Times*, she sent me words of encouragement. Perhaps she knew that whatever smugness I might have been guilty of had been exploded and would never reconstitute. This is the effect of metastasis: to teach you that you will never again, except in the most final way, be home free. At any rate, she began offering bits of lively advice, some of it quite funny, like the importance of grasping “what I have come to learn over many years of struggling with the problem—that getting ill, cancer, etc., isn’t a matter of justice or bad attitude or punishment or any of our anthropomorphic quasi-answers to justify such events It is a hard mindset to fight—that of having some power to cause and/or cure your own cancer/disease, etc. Pernicious. Counterproductive. Vindictive. Stupid. Spinach. The Hell with it.”

She also sent me *Sailing*, as absorbing as *In Another Country* and even richer, from which I learned to accept the fury I sometimes felt at the betrayal George’s cancer represented, an infidelity crueler than the affair I didn’t yet know he’d had: the threat of absolute abandonment. I could see, at last, how such anger might sustain and strengthen me for the hard but inevitable task of letting go. This was, as Susan had pointed out, “not my disease,” and I would have to accept George’s style of coping with it. Ed’s, she told me, involved “a lot of physical conditioning (though not to excess) just to stay in shape for ‘whatever comes,’ and of course, sailing. He reads books on mysticism and keeps a commonplace book. Remember, this is ten years down the road, and most strategies tend to wear a little thin. So it comes down to a little bit of this, a little of that, and when the time comes that something has to be done, he ‘does what he has to,’ surgery, chemo, whatever.”

I met Ed in person only once, briefly, when I was invited to Colby for a Women’s Weekend in April 1988. He was taller than I’d imagined, and although he spoke little, he seemed not so much taciturn as calm: a man who would indeed do what he had to do. Since Susan and I were only sporadically in touch, I often wondered what he was having to do, and hoped it wasn’t dying. When I saw his review in *The New York Times* of a book by terminally ill children, I was relieved: he was still alive. Over time, especially as George’s melanoma recurred in the small bowel and he too did surgery, chemo, whatever, Susan and Ed served as models for me. Knowing they had been through all we now endured, physically and emotionally, was immensely reassuring. There’s a lot to be said for having one’s hand held as one stumbles through the dark.

For this reason, when Susan wrote and told me Ed had died, I wondered whether I might lose heart. Clearly, George’s remission, sustained by his “whatevers”—the drugs tamoxifen and interferon, meditation followed by a carrot every morning, with maybe a miracle thrown in for good measure—might end. I’d been glad enough to follow Ed and Susan’s arduous trail through life; could I really bear to contemplate its inevitable end, much less find comfort there? Sustained by the report that he “struggled long and hard right to the end and didn’t give an inch to the darkness,” thereby offering the reassurance that we can all accomplish this hard task bravely if we will, I can.

Ed will never again be in the world; but neither can he ever not have been. And

so, in dying, he did not *leave*. Death is not the end. I don't mean this as some sort of mystical mumbo jumbo about spirits wafting upward to heaven (though if there is such a place, and Ed is in it, I hope to God it's got an ocean). Nor do I belittle the hole his death has ripped in the fabric of relationships that bound him to those who loved him. I mean simply that, when I spoke to Susan on the telephone today, we talked of Ed as necessarily as we did of Anne and James; he was no less real than his children for having died. In every act of recollection, we bear Ed forward with us, as others will bear us in our turn, all the way.