

The Best That Love Could

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Helene always warned me that she would leave this earth before me. I would argue with her, of course, as much for my comfort as hers. “I could get hit by a cab tomorrow,” I told her, referring to my frequent Manhattan bike rides. But predictably, blood cancer inflicted its slow violence well before I could make any fast exit on the street. My wife’s entire existence had been an inspiring but uphill battle against a multitude of systemic illnesses. I’ll always remember the resignation in her voice when she was required to recite her medical history to new doctors.

Over the years she developed feisty relationships with her professional caretakers, taking them to task for their minor foul-ups, but then engaging them so graciously that eventually they all loved her. She knew how to handle doctors, nurses, and hospitals all too well. They had saved her from childhood rheumatoid disease, and then managed her through a forty-year ordeal of abdominal surgeries, hip and knee replacements, partial blindness, drug treatments, and chemotherapy. Finally, at the young age of 53, side effects from a high-risk drug regimen caused a disastrous failure of her immune system. With ironic justice, medicine saved her and then killed her. If she was bitter about it, she never showed it.

The closest she ever came was her admission that she hated her wracked body, telling me near the end about the joy she felt in escaping it. She was right again. She had worn out her physical presence—what was occurring was naturally in tune. But it was hard for me to share her organic outlook. She was taking a long and final journey without me and I was joyless at the prospect.

As a result, I was the one who became bitter. I felt she had me at a specious advantage—a lifetime of disease to prepare for a predictive early leave. Love can be dangerous, and committed love the most perilous. Marriage tricks us into thinking that we are not alone, then slams us with the truth when a partner vanishes. After being joined at the hip, don’t be surprised if you have trouble walking when separated.

After the initial shock of her death subsided, I was strangely efficient with practical affairs—executing a will, changing account names, insurance, bank stuff. I even managed to keep food in the house. Affairs of the heart were another story. I’d find myself walking down familiar streets only to

discover that they all felt like foreign territory. I paced around my apartment unconsciously searching; but it wasn’t my glasses I had lost, it was emotional security, and it wasn’t to be found in a coat pocket or under a stray magazine.

We both loved music and I lived in fear of hearing a favorite song that might send me over the edge. Surprisingly, that never happened, but for the first time I noticed how many popular songs were about romance and the heartbreak of losing lovers. How trite they all seem when you’ve *really* lost your lover.

More disturbing was a radio piece I heard on NPR about a Seattle man who had lost his wife. In his grief, he began dressing up as Superman and hanging out in public places; he boarded airplanes in full cape and red-and-blue regalia. Before Helene died I would have squinted in disbelief at these antics, maybe even laughed, but now I listened, overwhelmed by his shrewd ploy. For a brief moment, I wished I could be Wonderboy. I understood this man—I knew as he did that mere mortals weren’t built to absorb so much daily pain.

Luckily, I had better friends than this poor soul. They kept me out of cheesy costumes and were always checking up on me. “How you *doing?*” they’d ask. How do you think, I wanted to reply, I’m devastated. But I would usually eke out, “I’m okay, I guess.” And it *was* a guess—I didn’t have a clue how I was doing. I did know that I needed them to ask, but I was used to showing vulnerability only to my wife. Their questions simply reminded me that she was no longer there for me.

From the time Helene’s illness became life-threatening, I wondered if writing about it would help. After a novel, a few poems and stories, I had the credentials to call myself a writer, though the word never rolled easily from my lips. Nevertheless, writing about it began to haunt me. My first thought—that I could *never* write about it—soon became, “I *have* to write about it.” And quick.

My greatest fear was that my connection with her loss would lose clarity over time. How naively foolish. Many months later, certain memories could still release a flood of tears. For a time, each day required a decision as to how many memories I could safely entertain. I worried that my grief was bordering on indulgence until a friend told me that four seasons had to be labored through. “Oh, it takes at least two years,” others advised. Conventional wisdom promises that time will heal all, but for me time was just an empty vessel to be filled with anguish.

I couldn’t keep my mind from reaching back, trying to feel her presence. It was a hurtful place, but so deep and real that everything else felt shallow

and irrelevant. At times, the memories were debilitating, but when they faded I became anxious to retrieve them. I struggled not to fix on the worst ones: when we first heard the word, leukemia, or that last week in ICU, and others too difficult to share. All my efforts failed. Tell yourself not to think about elephants and see how often they trample your thoughts and dreams.

But *what* would I write about? Grief had made me so fragile and self-centered that I was afraid it would be more about me than Helene. I began to recognize that I was having trouble with separation. When we were married we were at once more *and* less than ourselves alone. But now there was only me again, my buffer against midlife crisis no longer at my side. At some point, I realized that this was about more than losing my wife; it was about finding *my* life.

I wanted to write about our marriage, honor it, but I also wanted to be truthful. We had an extraordinary bond but not necessarily an extraordinary marriage. Helene was saddled with enough medical problems for a dozen people, and though I was physically healthy, living with me was hardly a stroll on the beach. I was no martyr; she gave as good as she got and we persevered. Like many long term relationships, it wasn't about sex; it was about friendship, companionship, and no doubt, security. Our triumph was our love and devotion to each other. We had no children, so we called the two of us family, our ranks filled out by a couple of dependent cats.

Humor had helped us through the toughest times—glib *black* humor to be exact, which won't surprise anyone who's been around people with disabilities. "Have I told you that I love you, lately?" I'd ask.

"No," she'd answer in mock irritation.

After a pause I'd say, "Well...I love you...*lately*." She'd laugh as if we hadn't shared this tired exchange a zillion times. My darkest line I saved for moments when nature's latest ravages left her feeling especially unattractive. "You're the best-looking, crippled, one-eyed, 53-year-old woman I know," I told her. She always smiled.

But there were also terrible lapses on my part. To my dismay, I made the clumsy discovery that drinking helps. Booze, partnered with my dark edge, tripped me up one night a few months after she slipped away on that nasty night in January. Punchy from too much wine, I heard myself making a bad joke with a close friend: "The bad news is my wife died; the good news is her jeans fit me." He didn't laugh and my own chuckle was brutally awkward. Only later, and sober, did I understand. Taking Helene was a bad joke on me, and with phony buck-up, I was showing I could take it.

Other weird actions sprang up as well. I not only wore her jeans but also her robe and other unisex pants. I donned an old pair of sunglasses that I had seen on her face in a dated photo when she lived in Spain. I wanted to climb into that photo and stop time.

I fought to make sense of my erratic behavior and wildly swinging emotions. Couldn't I have picked a healthier partner, I wondered. The shame from such thoughts tore me apart. Every criticism or harsh word I ever uttered came into play, all the things I meant to share but didn't. Fifteen years of loyalty suddenly paled against memories of flirtations or passing fantasies about other women. Survivor's guilt can be a cruel rumination and I was easy game.

They say all couples learn from each other, but sometimes men resist the equality in this premise. In hindsight, my history of haughty judgment and skepticism torments me. Only now can I fully appreciate Helene's artistic talents, her spunk and intellect, her patience and endurance. More importantly, I understood too late her focus on spiritual practice throughout her last precarious years. Hiding my genuine interest, I asked few questions about the books she read, teachers she studied, or the retreats she attended. My ego made me fail at what I feel now was a vital test.

My own curiosity about faith had always been more earthbound, leaning towards the candid lyrics of Okie folksinger, Iris Dement: "...*everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done/ but no one knows for certain, so I believe in love and I live my life accordingly/ so if it's all the same to you, I think I'll just let the mystery be...*"

I guess my faith is in that mystery.

Likewise, I had never cozied up to the supernatural or to belief in spirits. I relegated the thought that Helene's spirit might be present to those quiet moments where memories of her consumed me. I presumed she presided in the tears or smiles that would overtake me. But then on one particularly sad day in my endless task of reorganizing, I found one of her old journals stashed away on a top shelf. I opened it randomly, landing on a page she had written fifteen years earlier at the beginning of our relationship. She gushed romantically about being in love and having never been happier, convinced that she had finally met the perfect man for her. Its ardor embarrassed me, for surely I never lived up to her rosy vision of our future. Nevertheless, I was deeply touched at her vowing her heart so securely into my hands. Her written passages were truly a message from afar, and now that my heart was in *her* hands, it was easy to believe that she had guided me to that book, to that page, in one of my most desperate hours.

It shouldn't have surprised me. During her last six weeks in the hospital, I watched with amazement as she gave out as much love and energy as she received to visiting friends and family. Even after her condition became critical, she found ways to communicate using mime or written notes. Etched in my memory is the bittersweet message she sent me after being moved to ICU. After a close call, she had been dosed with a tranquilizer and I was told she would be incoherent. I leaned over her oxygen mask and peered hopefully into her drowsy eyes. "Wiggle your eyebrows if you love me," I begged. And wiggle they did.

Helene fought hard for life, but when faced with the inevitable, she showed a convincing acceptance that lifted me with her. Predictably, however, our last few days together tested the limits of my maturity, especially after a friend confided to me how worried Helene was about my going on without her. My wife's selfless concern gave me the strength to hide my growing despair—I never once broke down in her presence. Somehow I knew that this was the best act of love I could give. In her final hours, she taught me the most important spiritual lesson in life—how to take leave with courage and grace. The worst hours of my life were her finest.

She used her last communication to put to rest our shared notion that we had somehow failed in our grand undertaking of spending our lives together. Scribbling on a yellow pad she wrote to me, "We did the best that love could."

A year later, I am finally beginning to appreciate the wisdom and solace she bestowed on me in those few words. ☪