

Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

When Maggie learned that she was dying and that there was no treatment to save her, she was very angry, feeling correctly that she had been cheated of a life she was living to the fullest. This was very late in the day for Maggie - she would have less than two weeks before the end. Perhaps that was a gift, because a death sentence given months before would have enraged her beyond bearing.

There was never anything lukewarm about Maggie. She was a woman of strong likes and dislikes; of passionate love for her husband and children and grandchildren, of passionate interests which ranged from cooking to travel to friends old and new. These she held close, while she was capable of callous disregard for others. But central to her life was her fierce creativity and the work that she produced. This made her exceptional, a woman to know if possible and if not, to forgive.

We come to visit her in the ICU at Riverside. She is awake; I say Hi Maggie and hold her hand. She looks at me and says weakly: I'm not going to get better. How do you feel about that? I ask her. She hesitates, and I supply: Pissed? You could say that, she says. Her son Eric plays a Gilbert and Sullivan medley on his computer, and she beats time with her hand. She listens to Lehar too. This is music that she choreographed for Light Opera Columbus and for the light opera performances at Wooster every summer. Her arms move but otherwise she seems immobile. The cancer that will kill her is in her nervous system.

A day later she is in hospice at Kobacher House, lying on her hospital bed. She is getting plenty of pain medicine but virtually nothing to eat or drink. That is the hospice way it seems. I want to believe that hospice knows better than I what she needs. Her eyes open and close, she dozes fitfully, we wonder what she hears and sees. But when the familiar songs of Gilbert and Sullivan come on she awakes and her hand again moves in time to the music. Her dance friends arrive. They sit on either side of the bed and talk cheerfully about old times, the Edinburgh Festival, Dance Central. Bill Boggs and Mark Baker come. She knows they are there. They talk to her and she responds in a strong Maggie voice, perfectly lucid. Her family is amazed. All day friends stream though the room, and she gives what she can to all of them. Someone brings in old videos of past performances. She hears the music and though she can't see the video she sees the dance choreography in her mind. So a dancer friend tells me, with conviction. Her body fails but her mind is still here. The rage seems to have left her now, as if she has no energy left for it, she is simply with friends and having a good time. The next morning she is still talking, but in the afternoon she falls silent and drifts into a light sleep.

Twenty four hours later she is clearly dying. She lies quietly, only her restless arms and hands slowly move as if they are still shaping music. A nurse comes in and speaks to her very kindly. She tells Maggie that she is giving her pain medicine and sedatives to calm her. She brings four syringes and each one is slowly emptied into an IV port in the thin

arm. Sure enough, the hands come to rest. Her face is still, eyes not quite shut, mouth half open, a face refined to the essential Maggie. It is her death mask, a handsome one.

People still come into the room but now they are hushed. They sit by her bed and hold her hand and then make way for the next visitors. Off-stage, as it were, acquaintances are made, confidences shared. No one seems in a hurry to leave. The room is a nexus for disparate people, many of whom have never met before and who may never meet again unless in the brief public arena of the memorial service. What brings us together in this place is the slender thread of life contained in the failing body on the bed. It is Maggie's last party, and she the complete hostess. In a moment the thread will snap and we will all spin back to our customary orbits.

I think about that. How often in our lives we live in a familiar routine and place as if they will continue forever. Then suddenly the pieces of our lives rearrange and we are flung away into a new place, to a new pattern which in turn seems fixed and permanent until it also passes away. We are tethered to a stereopticon, with pictures in brilliant 3D so real we actually believe they are. Suddenly the picture changes, click, and a new reality is before our eyeballs, and then click, it changes again. This room of Maggie's is a brief image in the stereopticon and soon it too will disappear as, before long, will we.

RJP

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