

Anonymous Told Me So

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Eight months and eight days into widowhood I experienced one of those bouts of sleeplessness where the Great God Insomnia snatched me up and rattled me awake. This particular reentry was especially brutal: nothing felt familiar. Not the fan's shadow on the ceiling. Not the touch of the sheets to my skin.

We members of bereavement groups know the Great God Insomnia is wickedly cruel, and our best hope is to outsmart him. And sometimes we do, having discovered that if oblivion is sleep's objective, then oblivion by any other name is television, the internet, or, my personal favorite, reading.

Like the bedside books of many insomniac readers, mine are a schizoid jumble of incongruities: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* on top of *In Cold Blood*; a catalog from a cosmetics company named Bliss on the Bible; a thirty-five cent paperback potboiler by Harold Robbins on *The Last Days of Socrates by Plato*. And then there's Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, a lying title if ever I read one. I willed and willed my husband's cancer gone, but still Bill, like sleep, was snatched away, leaving my only purity a heart burning with a rage that rendered me fit company only for books.

Although an hour with any of the above titles surely could have triggered that vague shift in consciousness signalling me it was time to mark the page and close the covers, I opened, instead, *The Spiral Staircase* by British writer Karen Armstrong. Of all the books on my bedside table hers alone had a singular distinction: it had come from a library.

I believe a library brought Bill and myself together. New to teaching and to Baltimore, some forty years ago, I had noticed at lunch how a funny history teacher flirted with the Baltimore Colt cheerleader and ninth-grade math teacher beside me. But then I had let drop an idle remark about how I had just visited

Baltimore's esteemed Enoch Pratt Free Library, and how its magisterial main hall and massive collection had thrilled me. And suddenly the funny history teacher turned from the cheerleader and noticed me. Oh, yes, he did.

For forty-one years, Bill had been an ardent and utterly egalitarian bibliophile. His detailed lists of titles and authors totalled more than a book a day some years. Such a passionate reader needed a library nearby, so once, twice, a week he'd sail off to our local branch bemoaning its shortened summertime hours, or how its new releases were only weak reflections of Harold Robbins at his most mediocre.

Me, I read much more slowly and, even with easy renewals, I prefer to own my books. (Also, I'm something of a snob.) But sometimes I'd go along with Bill and sniff among the shelves, remarking that they didn't hold a single copy of *Little Dorrit*, but two of *The Lipstick Jungle*.

In May of 2007, Bill was hospitalized, near death, although, at that point cancer was merely suspected. Once he became stabilized and the definitive, fatal diagnosis was given, what he railed against was not his disease, but how his weakened state had reduced his concentration so severely he couldn't read. Deprived of reading he couldn't recognize himself; he had become a stranger to his own mind and saw no clear path through his final days.

Then, thanks to chemotherapy, he rallied. His concentration returned, and he read first the newspaper, then magazines, and, then, by mid-June, books. Off we'd sail to the library, oxygen tank in tow. By mid-July, his cancer had responded so favorably he no longer needed the oxygen and went to the library by himself. All summer and fall he'd sit on our patio, a cup of coffee at his elbow and a book before him.

As winter came and the new year began, and chemo became less and less effective, books, the respite and relief they gave, became ever more critical. In the first four months of 2008, he

read fifty-five. Gregory Pegg's *The Holy War* was the last title entered in his journal. The date is April 6, 2008. One month and one day later he died.

And so, eight months and eight days afterwards, bowing to The Great God Insomnia, I groped for Karen Armstrong's book. It appealed to me for several reasons. First, both Armstrong and I carry the indelible stamp of Catholicism. Secondly, she is refreshingly candid about her epilepsy, a disease my oldest grandchild has. But more than anything, widowhood has taught me what Armstrong refers to as her sense of isolation from what others regard as life.

A former nun, Armstrong tried and failed to find her niche. But not academia, not teaching secondary school, or a television career was a fitting home for her learned mind and questing spirit. Remaining on the periphery of life, she observed it, feeling herself, as we in bereavement groups say of ourselves, adrift.

We know well that sense of bifurcation. Our internal, broken-hearted lives, our real lives, are always more vivid than whatever the rest of the world sees us doing. Going to cookouts, getting our tires rotated, having our teeth cleaned, we seem like real people, but those are only our outer husks. Our real selves are buried deep inside and weeping.

The fall after Bill died, partly because I noticed myself avoiding places especially associated with him, and partly because buying books seemed like an indulgence on a widow's income, I went to our neighborhood library. Having heard an interview with Armstrong on the radio, I got her book. I must have handed my card to the librarian. Maybe I even thanked her. I don't know. I wasn't there, you see. My real me was seeing Bill the last time we had come to that library. There he was, slumped in a chair by the window, too weak to search the shelves himself. My real me was hearing him say, each time I bought him a new release for approval, "Nothing too thick. I can't hold them."

The night I reached for Armstrong's book, the Great God Insomnia had tag-teamed with this acute sense of isolation, making me feel that I was the only person awake. Anywhere.

And so I read on toward the final chapter where Armstrong, her television career and her association with her literary agent ended, resolves, in a Damascene moment, to write a book about God. Liking herself to a knight questing for the Holy Grail, she embarks into a dark, unknown landscape, her only certainty that the well-traveled paths that had ended in success for others, had led to disaster for herself.

The stillness and the night grew denser, until, on page 271, in the demi-darkness I discovered . . . a miracle. A pencilled message. On a common Post-it note. But a miracle nonetheless. From Anonymous.

On one of those commonplace little squares Anonymous had written three words: "This is true." And, then, so there could be no mistake, he'd drawn an arrow pointing like the finger of God to Armstrong's words: "In the past my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before."

What an act of faith on the part of Anonymous, that having no certainty and only thin hope someone would read his note, he had posted it anyway.

Of all God's creatures we humans alone have this singular ability to read and write. Separating us from all other animals, it connects us one to another. On papyrus, on paper, on Post-it notes, we make hatchmarks, little more than lines and loops, really, and execute a private transaction between two minds. We humans alone can obliterate the barriers of time and space to connect to one another. And to what's most human in ourselves.

I'd like to say that reading the note by Anonymous was a transformative moment. That I was inspired to shove my widow's weeds into tassled saddlebags and ride off to slay The Great God Insomnia.

But life is not fiction. The work of widowhood is more akin to Armstrong's own struggles when she resolved to write her book about God, and in so doing knitted together her inner and outer selves.

Finding your authentic self after your spouse dies is not easy. But it is not remarkable either. In every marriage, some one will do it. Their only hope will be to grope their way forward, finding guideposts wherever they can. As individual as their marriage was, so will be their guideposts.

Mine are books stacked on my bedside table, the memory of a good man's abiding love, and the bravery of people like Anonymous who leave breadcrumbs that sparkle like diamonds in the darkness. At the moment, as I stumble down this treacherous path, I have no certainty my severed selves will reconnect, or that one day I will emerge as a newly authentic me. But, if I am to live, my only way is forward. This I believe. This is true. Anonymous told me so.