

# Toby's Memoir



*Keith Althaus*

There is a brotherhood of age, which includes historical events, great tragedies, wars, disasters, symbolic losses, notorious trials, investigations, elections, down to athletic heroes and matinee idols. Eras also include pathologies: John O'Hara's classic story *The Doctor's Son* stretches way beyond life in the coal fields during the Spanish Flu pandemic in the early 20th century. But it also defines its time. We are what we know and have lived through. Just to not go blank at the mention of Caruso or Amelia Erhart makes you part of a class. For an increasing many AIDS is an especially vile STD but it does not conjure in any real way an era of candlelit marches, strident demonstrations, as well as private, unrelenting grief.

It was Miriam's and Toby's fate to be at the broad center of another epidemic, fuelled by the new demographics, for if everyone died at sixty Alzheimer's would be a relatively rare occurrence. Its newness as a plague is compounded by its difference from those other illnesses. They say everyone is touched by cancer but Alzheimer's does more than touch, it demands action, and if not action then abdication. You either move closer to or farther away from the patient. You engage or withdraw. The refrain "I couldn't do that" fills its unwritten history. The aging face a dual threat: loss of ability and function in

someone you love or are responsible for, or in yourself. Toby doesn't dwell on what we know, that many abandon and disappear, some step up, few with his devotion. Reading this memoir with its dogged dailiness, routines meant to inform not impress, we nonetheless are impressed by his commitment. He gives no explanation, though clearly this gift for compassion and specifically the ability to face the body in extremes goes way back. The moving story of his stint in the Naval Hospital demonstrates an equanimity unusual in one so young. Perhaps age adds nothing, and we are as compassionate at twenty as we'll ever be. That is for many of us a frightening thought.

On one level this memoir's value is to show it can be done. What so many see as impossible, fear as inevitable, can be faced and lived through. In Toby's case with great thoughtfulness and dignity, grace, and without giving up, in fact acquiring more humanity. To read this memoir of one of life's greatest fears realized is to have one's head turned around. You hardly notice Toby does not rely on anything he can name, not divine intervention, no mention of the wedding vows, he is acting on instinct, love.

He is not really forthcoming about his sacrifice. Artists are the most selfish of people. Their work draws them in, they are not evil, not mean, not many things, but they are selfish. This memoir is a happy surprise. Part of its exceptional beauty may be that it is written under circumstances which seem to shame fantasy, the trivial and entirely decorative, let alone the false. Toby has always shown a great preference for the real, the true. Preferring the unpainted surface where you can see the grain. A building, a structure whose "bones" can be discerned, to one that is hidden, covered up. A journey followed through to the end.

We have grown up in a society increasingly protective, not so much from what will harm us as from what we fear may harm us. We mask pain from the first ache. We are ever more euphemistic and risk averse. A segment of society has rebelled from this attitude, with extreme sports, "Back to the Land", and a dozen other ways of countering its flight from raw experience. Somehow we must connect or reconnect with the body, not just in pleasure, but on its long narrowing path through age toward death. Toby's memoir points in this direction.

Toby lives around the corner from me, though it is not really as close as it sounds. If you go as the crow flies, there is a swamp, a

hill and plateau of thick and prickly undergrowth. If you go by car it's a long way by a pond and up a ridge to where he lives. But it feels closer. Two natural sounds connect us, we can both hear out our windows. There is a pack of coyotes living on that hill, and their howling is one thing, but their frenzied shrieks and yelps which one presumes accompany the torture death of some small animal are truly horrible to listen to. One is happy to be home and not out there and to remain ignorant of exactly what is happening. The other sound comes in April: the peepers, little tree frogs who from every swamp, wetland, vernal pool, emit a high throbbing, piercing sound drowning out everything as it announces Spring. This year Toby will hear those alone.

Two specific scenes I recall when I think of Miriam: how she loved the sound of Toby's voice. She told me so in so many words. We were at a outdoor reading, on a deck, as she leaned forward to hear, rapt, she reminded me of a teenage fan listening to a favorite band, or better, like the opera aficionados straining to miss not a note, not a word, who have the score and libretto by heart.

The other time she was driving by my house and saw me and pulled over to tell me how much she liked a little article I'd written on my wife Susan's art. It became clear it was not the discussion of the art that moved her but the bits and pieces that talked about our lives together. It was the acknowledgement of the relationship, the partnership, she cherished. One appreciation couched in another. These two moments alone are enough to assure me Miriam would have appreciated this memoir. That voice she strained to hear is on the page, steady, clear. She would have understood the frank and loving portrait, recognized its importance as a document and its value as art.