

V E N A S Q U E



M A R Y S T E W A R T H A M M O N D

He'd build a fire, and bring me
strong, dark, bitter coffee every morning
with lots of milk, warmed, little sugar, just the way I like it,
and we'd sit opposite each other clutching our mugs
in a little loaned stone house in a little stone *village perché*
in Provence, in December, in the year 1991.

We probably said a few words.

Words of endearment. But we were each in a place
the other couldn't reach, and the winter landscape outside matched,
which is why we didn't want to look at it, had no room
to take it in because it was
already inside us.

What possessed us?

How could we forget Provence was on the same latitude as Nova
Scotia?

He had brought a 1,007-page book with him,
Robert Massie's *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming
of the Great War*, to be exact, although
that's less important than the number of pages.
It would be about here, after a few words, a few
swallows of coffee, when he would begin to read.
I had brought a blank notebook, but was frightened
of what I'd find there. I would begin to cry,
silently. Or, maybe it was the other way around;
I'd begin to cry, and then he'd pick up his book.
It doesn't matter. He was not shutting me out;
he was abandoning himself. He is a man who needs

certainly the way the rest of us need food, or sleep,
 and he no longer had a perfect wife; he had a wife
 who had just been treated for cancer, who
 most certainly was going to live,
 but might not.

He also learned,
 the day before we flew to France, the way lovers do
 in Disease of the Week movies, to frolic in lavender
 and sunbeams, when facing death,
 that he might not have a job when we got back.
 And he was fifty-five years old.
 That was possibly scarier than having a wife with cancer.

Excuse me, a wife who's "gotten over" cancer.
 It is advisable when dealing with this disease
 to think of it as being something like
 first cousin, seventeen times removed, from a flu bug, because
 language, after all is said and everything
 possible done, is the only hot oil left to pour down
 on the marauding cells of any second wave trying
 to climb the ramparts. The second attempt to invade
 has been known to succeed.
 We, being everyone, don't talk about that.
 That is the value of language.

On the other hand, language is quite
 handy for getting cancer off the table when there are other issues like:
 being jobless in America in 1991 at the age of fifty-five.
 Which you can't treat at Christmastime sitting in Provence.
 Actually, unemployment is a condition
 that can be treated with language, but the odds of it being a cure

rank with the odds that fruits and vegetables will cure cancer. Take spin, for example: Spin is extremely useful once you've decided on a treatment of choice for staying alive financially, or corporeally. After that it is probably better to look straight ahead, turn neither to your right nor your left, neither to positive nor negative.

Everyone who survives treatment is said to have survived cancer. The word "recovering" would be closer to reality, but instead we have the hocus pocus expression "cancer survivor." I am "a cancer survivor." Hello. My name is Mary Stewart, no hyphen, and I am a "cancer survivor."

(Notice. I use quotations marks.

Spin doctors do not.)

This is the opposite of an AA meeting. This is a lie. Or not a lie. This is medicaleaze. The truth is the only way you know you've survived cancer is when you die of something else, meaning you never know.

So he was pissed. At me.

Of course, it's dumb. But understandable.

At the bank for giving him notice.

At himself. Beyond idiocy. Beyond a woman's comprehension.

I could tear my hair out on that one.

He was by my side like his life depended on it no more.

He had been my shepherd through the valley from suspicion to biopsy

to diagnosis to surgery, through meticulous notes on treatment options,

four different opinions, none of which agreed, we get to choose, eeny, meeny, miney, moe.

The question never answered? "What would your wife do?"

This is what the movies don't tell you about having, or not having cancer, and about having, or not having, employment:

- 1) You are all alone with this. It's just you
and the shelter of whatever language you can muster.
- 2) That you are your own *village perché* clinging to the edge of a cliff
where you can do nothing for each other.
- 3) Even friends have no access, unless they already have a passport
stamped *village perché*. The rest, who understand where you are,
don't like it any better than you do. It could happen to them.
- 4) You are walled up, sealed off. Only the enemy can get in.
- 5) You will have found powerlessness.

We didn't go out much. The road in and out of the village was narrow, winding and steep. Dangerous, it seemed to us, and we were already in enough danger. Besides, everything was *fermé*, including the landscape, like the last scene in *On the Beach* about the end of life. The Bomb drops, wind spreads radiation over the globe until it reaches Australia, and the cast dies in Rembrandt lighting.

No lavender. Nothing green and living. Dead leaves cling to grapevines.

Wind machines move them. Accurately. The moves are stubby. A sheet of old newspaper rattles, miked, down an empty street.

Of course, in our scene, whatever goes on underneath the earth in winter

was still going on, but it required more imagination than we had available

to re-vegetate the brown and umber boulders of the Luberon.

Even the sky was open only five to six hours a day.

Meanwhile the mistral operated twenty-four hours through us.

When we could
 bring ourselves to climb
 into our rental car, we went to see the other *villages perchés*,
 and saw them as through slivers of daylight
 the width of arrow slits in castle walls.
 Mostly, we sat in the little stone house with the dark
 scratching at the windows trying to get in.
 Somewhere, in the castle keep, screams
 emitted from the dungeons, although
 we were absolutely still and silent inside our house.

Depending
 on atmospheric conditions, sometimes Mahler
 or Beethoven joined us, courtesy of *Radio Classique*.

He didn't want me to know he was scared. For us.
 Or, he didn't want himself to know. He wasn't talking.
 Maybe he didn't know the word for "scared."
 Maybe he didn't know how to pronounce the word,
 didn't know the language of the *village perché* he had landed in.
 Maybe the language
 hadn't been invented yet for stiff upper lipped men without a job.

It seemed better not to let on I knew.

Maybe he didn't want me to know he was scared I would die.
 Maybe he didn't want himself to know.

We had always slept, arms and legs, entwined,
 loving the feel of the flesh of the other. Now, we couldn't bear
 the feel of the other. It was not a rebuff. It was as if
 every nerve was on fire, as if touch would scorch us.

We slept in Venasque on our backs,
arms to our sides, our eyes open to the dark
until sleep closed them. This is survivable. All that is needed
is to know what *village perché* the other is in, and why,
what the time zone is, then wait