

## Personal View

"Just look at that." David Kyle studied the pathology report for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Sandy. Whatever that is, it's bad." His concern showed as he handed it back. My brother Quentin's ESR was 143. It had all begun with a couple of unexplained episodes of pneumonitis, and at David's suggestion he had been seen by our chest physician, who had performed a blood test. And so Q entered on the downward staircase of terminal illness at 41. The ensuing five years of despair, hope, high- and low-technology medicine, acceptance, resignation, and release is familiar enough to us all. But it is usually somebody else's story.

Incredulity at first. But our pathologist telephoned to break the diagnosis of myeloma as gently as he could a few days later. Fooling Q was something you did at your peril. "Some inflammation in the bone marrow" was the most non-committal description I could manage. Lame as it was, this seemed to suffice for some time, though I knew he had not been deceived for an instant.

"But how serious is it?" We were sitting in the doctor's office in the hospital after a blood transfusion several months later. All I could do was to give the brackets of prognosis as recorded in the literature, which I'd scoured unavailingly. This seemed to lift a load from his shoulders and he never mentioned it again. "I don't know what's wrong with me and I don't want to know," was his remark to my mother at the end of the year. But with a geographer's appreciation of how the land lay he could already discern the limits of what medicine had to offer. He opted for help from elsewhere, and through Canon William Purcell was introduced to Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley, whose healing powers are legendary. He had two meetings with the Bishop, and immediately after the first one a serene detachment from his own predicament became noticeable. I saw, perhaps for the first time, the ultimate futility of attempting to "heal" the body, a lost cause if ever there was one. But the Spirit, however broken, is always capable of repair. Should we perhaps enter into more formal collusion with the churches? When the congregations appear to have moved en bloc into our surgeries, and millions are being spent on psychotropic drugs, the churches might redress the balance. A fraction of the time and expense devoted to the chimera of living standards spent on ensuring a higher standard of dying all round might add immeasurably to the sum total of human happiness.

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We do not change. Nor did he, save to mellow from his crisper self a little. The boy who had been a late reader—his great leap forward being the discovery of the *Fishing Gazette* at 7—had become a dedicated schoolmaster, whose infectious enthusiasm for geography, CCF, mountain rescue, and all activities to do with fishing carried all along with him, for he never forgot what his own early learning had been like. Though he gradually phased himself out of his major activities he continued to teach three days a week. Fly-tying classes went on as before, and parties of boys were taken to fly-casting competitions and off to fish the evening rise as if nothing had altered.

The illness was punctuated by expeditions to the Towy for the sewin, with lengthening pauses for coffee, sandwiches, and "a drop of the hard stuff" at midnight. There was an outing to Lewis, where he had two salmon on at once (one on a dropper), lost the rod, and recovered it to land one of the fish. And fishing came into the wards; the sight of Q tying flies on his bed table was familiar in Brecon and Barts, or reading Righyni and Falkus as the blood ran slowly in.

Last summer the river was low, but in early June we had a couple of nights of rain and it seemed worth trying for a salmon at lunchtime. Some cormorants have based themselves on an old poplar tree, and the long run above it is a favourite place. A walk of 50 yards down easily sloping turf from the main road has you on the bank. The sun leant down, dragonflies clattered gently around, and Q spread his mac on the ground and took it all in.

"You fish it down, San, I'll watch."

"Well, you try a spinner afterwards."

But he would not. Though the most generous of fishermen, I knew that failure to wield a rod at all was serious. I put down fly, spinner, and worm, all to no effect, while he lay contentedly watching. He must have felt awful, but he never had complained and he did not then.

"We'll get one here in the autumn." I kidded myself he had said, "We'll get one." But he knew the autumn was a long way off, and he had really said, "You'll get one." We climbed slowly up the gentle meadow for the last time. I went back dejectedly to the afternoon surgery while he returned to teach—almost till the end of term.

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The inverse-gratitude law had always been a puzzle to me. But I came to understand it rather better. It refers above all to kindness. Whatever was happening it was the kindness, not the skill or the medicine, we were grateful for. Partners who understood and helped; nurses who made it all a little bit easier than they need have done; the specialist that last week, during what was obviously a chaotic morning in Barts, who spent a quarter of an hour talking to me. Only a suspicion of tired defence around the eyes of his staff nurse told of the daily stress of running a place like Annie Zuntz ward, which was full of young men like Q, all of them with the same sort of prognosis. We had come to the end of the road, but it did not feel like it. Q lay back in bed in the ward, tired from tying flies he would never use, as uraemia galloped relentlessly on.

"We should concentrate on keeping him comfortable," said the specialist.

"Yes." We shook hands, but I could not look at him, or anyone else, in the face for a while.

It was suddenly important to get home.

The dining room became a ward, with bed, wheelchair, and the rest, and his delight on returning cheered everyone. For four days of progressive decline he was nursed by his wife Dorlie with incredible devotion and care. The boys came home from school and there was a wonderful Sunday evening when he sat in his wheelchair in the kitchen puffing his little pipe and chatting away about anything but his own troubles. Later that night, when we were alone, he outlined in the most matter-of-fact way arrangements for funeral service and cremation, and his hopes for the family afterwards. On Tuesday morning he died.

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Two months later it rained and I went back to the Usk. The cormorants took off on their lonely circle into the dusk. The grass was sopping and the water high and dark. "You'll get one here in the autumn." I cast down as methodically as I could, for I had a feeling I was being scrutinised as the fly swung round in the strong water. On the eighth cast the rod tip bent savagely down. I knew then that it was not the end of the story, nor ever would be.

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Brecon