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# GIFT OF THE MAGI IN TRAVERSE CITY

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*Review of Dementia: A Love Story by Stephen Lewis, Mission Point Press (2021)*

“When I am complimented for my good care of Carol, I want to say, ‘But yes, I am doing this for me as much, and perhaps more, than for her. It is possible that were Carol in a facility her care would be as good, maybe even better, than what I can offer. At least, it would be professional. I am taking care of her in our house because I cannot imagine, at this point, being without her physical presence in my life.’” - Stephen Lewis, *Dementia: A Love Story*

Some of us are old enough to remember the movie with Ali McGraw and Ryan O’Neal, based on Erich Segal’s novel *Love Story*—watching, knowing how it would end—but still clinging to the possibility of Jenny’s recovery as the story of her illness unfolds—they who are so young, so beautiful, and so terribly in love. Released fifty years ago, the film and the book were said to be an unlikely balm for a country wracked by the Vietnam War. And I wonder if a similar effect might be in store for the reader of Stephen Lewis’ memoir, *Dementia: A Love Story*. If only there were a portmanteau for hopeless hope! Surely, there must be an amazing German word like *zeitgeist* or *fernliebe* that catalyzes this trope of hope against hope—or even hope combined with dread. How is it that we take in *Hamlet* or *King Lear* and still hope that Ophelia or Cordelia won’t die?

And yet—here’s the difference. This is life, not the symbolic stand-in, but the real thing that in the hands of this writer holds the reader like art does, by words that succeed—as “true stories, well told”—as described by Lee Gutkind, whom *Vanity Fair* has called “the godfather” of creative nonfiction for his part in bringing the genre back in into the literary canon—and back in vogue.

We are now in a time calling for memoir, for these “true stories, well told”—and we are desperate for hope. And this memoir does offer hope, despite the hopelessness of its story. What slowly unfolds is the story of a man whose wife is irreparably in the grip of early onset dementia, possibly brought on—but definitely accelerated—by chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer. He compares the disease to a

car riding at full speed, whose driver cannot stop it, in spite of the pedestrian stepping out from the curb who is oblivious to the danger. Lewis calls the dementia an “effective, if harsh tutor,” and himself a “stubborn, resistant, but ultimately accepting student of its hideous machinations” (364).

Lewis braids the story of his courtship and marriage with the deeply quotidian moments of caregiving. There are photos of his wife, Carol, that show her sitting in a cherry-shaker, at the desk where she clerked as a lawyer, and at their wedding. There are descriptions of the various pertinent equipment, and in particular the “tilt” chair that succeeds in providing some freedom, some joy. There are stories of handles to grip, for help climbing the stairs—although all too soon, those handles will become obsolete, as the stairs prove too formidable—and Carol will remain downstairs, as will Steve. He describes their sleeping arrangements, the way their home is transformed to accommodate the changes, the decisions about care. He tethers stories of their former life to meaningful objects that help tell who he is, who Carol is; stories of favorite foods, of the routines he establishes, of the various decisions he is forced to make as the disease pursues its deadly course. And while this is not a young couple in their twenties, but in fact an older couple in their sixties and seventies (Lewis is ten years older than his wife), it’s a true story—*not fiction*—and there is a profound feeling of connection for the reader due in part to writing style, structure—and the very voice of the writer. Lewis has written novels and textbooks; his doctorate is in Puritan American literature, so—no, this is not the first book he has penned; it is, however, his first memoir. Although he claims not to have indulged prior to this as writer or reader in the contemporary explosion of memoir and creative nonfiction, Lewis was an English professor with scholarly familiarity with Melville, Hawthorn, Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, to whom he occasionally refers in these pages. But this is not a litany of detached, moralistic, or spiritual ponderings or the rebel’s philosophies while choosing to follow his philosophic abandonment of the so-called civilized life. It’s the record of a man’s dedication to his dying spouse, a woman whose mind is deserting her body, a disconnect profound and unstoppable.

At one point, Lewis compares the dementia to the thick layer of snow that covers up every spot of existence as he looks out the window of their home in Michigan. But the analogy only goes so far, he writes, because the snow will melt. He’s been told, and he’s been shown there’s no hope, but

he carries on as if there is. He persists with dignity and love and everything that makes this book an exemplary work of literature, worthy of reading, not just for the story, not just for the clarity of the writing and revelations of both his and his wife’s characters and biographies, but for the model he provides as a caregiver, as someone who has the mixture of humility, compassion, and strength to care for another human being.

They were sweethearts, they met in academia. She’d left the family farm—where she was the first girl to manage a cherry shaking machine—to come east to go to school; he was a professor and writer, divorced, ten years her senior—a city boy, born and raised in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. She—taking writing courses, envisioning herself a writer—would also go for her law degree, and somewhere in the middle of this, she broke up with the boy she’d come east with and met this professor, while sitting in the library of the college that would make him a professor emeritus years later, when he left with his family—this farm girl and their daughter—to move back to the very place where she was from on that thin strip of land, known as Old Mission Peninsula jutting out into Lake Michigan and known for producing something like 75% of the world’s tart cherries. It’s a love story from beginning to end.

What makes this book so powerful is that it’s written in real time—not in retrospect. It’s written by someone who had the presence of mind to record the moment—and the tension, the intensity are not lost upon the reader. Every passage in the book, only minimally edited, first found a home in a blog that Lewis shared with Facebook friends. The idea to pursue a journal of this kind originally came from a former student of Lewis, who suggested that writing routinely in the form of a journal or blog, a series of entries, might help to balance his caregiving and offer Lewis purposeful activity when little else could be done—while performing a service for those who might be in a similar situation.

The blog amounted to nearly eighty entries that essentially spun out of a structure that supplied an initial grounding in setting—time/weather—and the planned activity; from this he carved what amounts to extremely compressed essayistic moments. These small blocks of prose are in themselves complete with a title, along with a beginning, middle, and end—very satisfying to set down and pick up again—and perfect for both readers of the blog and of the book.

If the reactions to the blogs serve any kind of indication of how the readers of this book might respond, the suggestion of Lewis' student waxes profound. One of the readers of his blog—most of whom one assumes are friends and associates—writes that she wished she'd known his wife—so compelling is this portrait. As Lewis links a number of Carol's before-dementia stories to the domestic artifacts, he also describes excursions outside of the old north country farmhouse surrounded by cherry orchards and Lake Michigan and more often than not a good deal of snow. Not only do we see the vividly alive, fascinating, interest-laden lovely Carol of many talents, but we also are drawn to the land, the home, the history—and all that interests her. We are compelled by the setting as much as by her character, her life that he, and we, are losing.

There are occasions when she calls for him, when he wonders which "Steve" she is summoning—whether it's the "before dementia Steve," or the current Steve. There are times when she squeezes his hand and the touching moment when Lewis announces that he's going downstairs to exercise and jokingly reminds her to stay put.

This time I added, "And don't party like you usually do when I'm gone."

Her face opened into a wide smile.

And she laughed.

Not a big belly laugh, but a very discernible laugh.

She was with me in that moment, completely and as fully as she used to be (255).

By coincidence, in the middle of all this, Carol's favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, makes a retrospective comeback in *The New York Times Book Review*, which becomes the occasion for Lewis to consider whether an audiobook might hold her interest—and it does. It's a book that never captured Lewis, who tries, unsuccessfully, to interest Carol in the "less than positive" reviews. Of course, as a reader who similarly invested an enormous amount of time and love imagining Jean Louise Finch, better known as Scout, I know *exactly* why a precocious farm girl might hold onto that book for a lifetime. Another time, Lewis reads one of her own short stories to his wife—and *that* story delivers—both for her and for him. He marvels at how gifted a writer she is—how her work stands up. It's important to note a few things here, namely that before the transformation of blog to book—and perhaps even before

he ever dreamed of publishing this work—Lewis determined to find a publisher for Carol's stories, which he succeeded in doing; the second thing: I reviewed the book, titled *The Wolfkeeper* for *New Territory Review*; and now in the interest of full disclosure, I must say that Carol and I had become writing friends—friends who write, friends who read each other's work—and I adored her stories. About twenty years before she passed, I'd asked to interview her for my column in a small women's newspaper on Long Island.

And so, I can say that this book succeeds whether you "wish" you'd known Carol, or you actually did know Carol. And while Lewis engages the reader with asides from literature, and while there are a number of themes here, there is an especially powerful idea around the duality, around what he calls the "two Steves" and the "two Carols." He becomes aware early on that Carol does not associate the caregiving "Steve" with the husband "Steve," which certainly parallels his own revelation that Carol *before* the disease is not the same person as she is *after* the onset of the disease. This becomes an ongoing negotiation.

One of his readers, so moved, offers up her own very poignant story in the comments. She writes: "One time, my late husband told me I looked just like his wife . . . I asked if she was pretty. His eyes lit up, and he smiled even bigger and said, 'Oh, yes!'"

The reader responds to the clarity of his structure, his careful attention to the details (another one of the commenters of his blog wrote: "It's the little things") and his humility, his so-called internship, with this "hideous" disease as his "tutor." But what is most moving is the dignity of his approach, the evidence of his appreciation and respect for all Carol had wished to accomplish, from her fiction to the work with the historical society of her town, along with her interest in the land, the water, in the flora and fauna, in photography, in music, in history—all of this intelligence funneled into an interior world that no one but Carol had access to—his complete and wholesale loss of the beloved—and his willingness, as he writes, to care for her because he "cannot imagine" a life without her.

That Lewis is able to sustain this space of hope against hope, even when hospice enters the picture, and how he navigates this devastating and dark road with all of its cliffs, as meticulous with the details of his story as he is with the details of his caregiving, is a testament both to his wife and to his own humanity.

Therein lies our hope. ♦