

SYLVIE TERESPOLSKI

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, KETZEL?

I was at the hospital visiting a friend of fifty years, Ketznel, who just had quadruple bypass surgery after she suffered a heart attack and as people are wont to do when they've had a close call she began to tear up as I sat by her bedside. She took my hand and softly said, "You're so beautiful and smart and kind, I can't understand why you never found someone to love you after your divorce."

I said nothing because I found myself in semi-shock. This topic had never come up between us and I sat there bristling at what I interpreted as pity and an erroneous perspective. My being alone after my divorce twenty-seven years ago and after a miserable twenty-six-year marriage never struck me as a particularly unfortunate situation. Many people live with tons of loneliness even if they live with someone or a bunch of people and I had long ago concluded that fear of being alone was the number one reason that people got together after propagating years were over. I guess my silence sent the message that she should continue. "Do you ever think about it?"

I remained mute because I couldn't tell her what I really mused about while she was struggling between the here and the ever after. One cannot start the eighth decade of life without being aware of the certainty of death. At this stage, I am more than ever aware of the hangman's noose and I certainly didn't want to answer her with death on my mind. In one year, I lost nine acquaintances, six women and three men. While they were not necessarily part of my daily life, they were present at some time in my story. Most were my contemporary—some a bit older or younger. Sometime in the recent present, I had talked to them and was deeply aware of their existence and suddenly my once-in-a-while lunch date, or "here's a good book to read" adviser is gone. No possibility of telephone calls, dates for coffee, laughs, tears, remembrances.

I didn't tell my friend lying there with fluid in her lungs and oxygen feeders that my most powerful musing lately is how is "it" going to happen?

And the "it" is not "love." Cancer, heart, stroke, Alzheimer's anyone? The statistics are enough to make one less than cheerful. If you live to be 85, your chances are one in three that you'll develop Alzheimer's. I read the obituaries in *The New York Times* searching for clues for longevity especially when I see someone, a perfect stranger close to my age of 73. How did they live their lives that brought about their premature death? At least, I consider death in one's seventies premature. I'm a bit smug with the silent answer. Surely, with my good living of exercise, proper diet, I will have a longer healthier expectancy than they did. The limitations? What will the limitations be? Diminished eyesight, hearing, flexibility, strength, toughness? Diminished, diminished, diminished. Even worse, people will have diminished expectations and automatically put you into the "old lady" slot.

Right now, I'm just a bit slower on the "Jeopardy" questions and the crossword puzzle answers. The responses are on the tip of my tongue but the synapses don't connect immediately. Maybe a split second later or maybe at 2:00 a.m., I'll remember that George Fox founded the Quakers or that the Congo is the longest semi-circular river in Africa, or that Dylan's other name is Zimmerman.

A lot really to think about—the unknown, the somewhat scary, the "out of your hands" events in your life.

Eventually, I found enough voice to say to her, "How could I not think about love? It's everywhere. I mean everywhere and the majority of it is about carnal cravings." (I'm writing this as *Sex and the City* is being distributed worldwide.) "I wonder if anyone ever did a scientific study of what we learned by osmosis—just by flicking the radio dial, seeing a newspaper headline, hearing an advertisement for a movie, watching the world of people walk by on a Sunday afternoon in the park, reading a book.

"Where would Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Notorious* be without those gorgeous love scenes between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman? I know younger people might find their models in today's romantic comedies but no contemporary movie says it better than those scenes between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, or Ingrid Bergman with Humphrey Bogart. With all their clothes on their love was palpable and could reach out from the screen and touch your heart and you would say to yourself, 'I want that. Whatever it is they're having, I want it.' I said that before that line became famous in *When Harry Met Sally*."