

Adventures of a One-Breasted Woman: Reclaiming My Moxie after Cancer

Susan Cummings

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By her early forties, Susan Cummings had compiled an eclectic resume: a stint teaching in Cairo, a period in Paris, years acting on stage in Manhattan. She had also discovered a calcification in her breast. A mastectomy removed the immediate threat, but that flirtation with her mortality was real enough to confuse Cummings' comforts and convictions. What did she really want out of the rest of her life, and how could she achieve it?

Its pages both mirthful and forthright, Cummings' memoir walks readers through a cancer survivor's stages of acceptance. The journey involves expected emotions, like anger, explored deftly in a chapter in which Cummings pens aggressive letters to all those frustrating and disappointing her, from flaky doctors to errant health food stores. "Wake up and smell the miso!" she rages when a purportedly macrobiotic purveyor slips margarine into the baked goods. Cummings also finds herself employing other coping mechanisms, including a whirlwind search for alternative health-care options that involves downing homeopathic pills and dubious elixirs.

Cummings confronts, and demolishes, conventional explanations for why cancer happens, all of them laden with victim-shaming and none of them ultimately helpful. She also wryly relates the neuroses that arise when a single frightening diagnosis makes one aware of the breadth of other possible scary diagnoses. These reactions are sometimes moribund, sometimes absurd, and sometimes frenetic, but they are always wholly human and sympathetic.

The book is poised to resonate with those who have shared Cummings' health concerns and with women in general, as body image issues are a recurrent theme. The author recalls a lifetime of small-breastedness prior to her one-breastedness, and her ultimate decision to forgo artificiality is a bold one. Pages that meditate on the beauty of asymmetry are particularly powerful, as are recollections of the way friendships develop, deepen, or crumble when health scares are added to their mix.

A bit of statuary, stumbled upon during a hike undertaken to distract, depicts a woman's hands crossed over her breasts; this becomes the vehicle by which Cummings explores new questions of spirituality with both poignancy and some hilarity. "Grace happens all the time, dear," God assures her in an internal dialogue, one which also includes a cheerful reminder that Cummings may remain in remission and still be susceptible to lightning strikes and choking on chicken bones. The author's previous regrets become a site from which she reinvents, and reinvigorates, her life. Ultimately, a diagnosis which made Cummings reflect that she ought to have danced more isn't a hopeless one; it prompts her to do precisely that, and more, with transformative results.

Readers will be charmed and inspired as Cummings reconciles herself to, and situates herself in, a post-cancer life. Her revelations are often intimate, and her willingness to explore family and personal disappointments and forgiveness lend the project affecting power. The triumphs of the book's final pages are a welcome rebirth which perfectly punctuate this celebratory work.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March 19, 2013)

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