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The Lightning Within

Sharon San Angelo
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“Round and round she goes; where she stops, nobody knows,” cries the carnival barker as he spins the wheel of fortune. First-time author Sharon San Angelo may have had the same thought as she stepped onto the medical merry-go-round in search of a diagnosis and treatment for unusual, seizure-like waves that struck her at age forty. A nurse herself, San Angelo was better equipped than most to understand the recommendations of her doctors, and yet it took eight years before her condition was properly treated. *The Lightning Within* chronicles San Angelo’s journey through specialists’ offices and operating rooms on her quest for clues about her puzzling symptoms.

San Angelo’s first symptoms—pain and a mysterious, spreading numbness—came upon her at the most mundane moments. She may have been hanging laundry out to dry or cutting carrots for dinner when the strange sensations would begin, ultimately pinning her to the floor, helpless. The immediacy with which San Angelo describes these scenes takes the reader back in time to experience the bewilderment and fear along with her. One might expect her to use dramatic, emotional language to describe her feelings, but her direct, unembellished style conveys both the urgency of each hospital visit and San Angelo’s own no-nonsense approach.

Anyone who has dealt with a chronic illness will understand San Angelo’s willingness to accept early diagnoses and treatments ranging from gall bladder surgery to epilepsy medications. She authentically captures the authority with which doctors can deliver their opinions, right or wrong. Many of the first explanations turn out to be wrong or, at best, incomplete. While San Angelo expresses her frustration with a system that bumps her from test to test and back again, she rarely complains and never whines. As she says, sometimes one must “face life and do what needs to be done.”

For San Angelo, what needs to be done ultimately involves major surgery, and a big leap of faith that this, at long last, will provide a cure for her worsening symptoms. She takes readers through every step of the process, from the operating room to the removal of surgical staples weeks later. Domestic details—the birth of her first granddaughter, for instance—balance the accounts of medical procedures. San Angelo keeps it personal, sharing the supportive relationship with her faithful husband Dave, although their remembered dialogue is understandably imprecise when recreated a decade later.

Inspirational in an understated way, *The Lightning Within* offers a first-hand view of what it is like to navigate the world of chronic illness and still maintain a strong faith in self, family, and life.
SHEILA M. TRASK (September 26, 2012)

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