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Autobiography & Memoir

Who in This Room: The Realities of Cancer, Fish, and Demolition
Katherine Malmo
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Cancer memoirs, if it's not too insensitive to say, are multiplying daily, and while that's probably good—everyone has a slightly different medical story and perspective worth hearing—too few allow the reader in on as many levels as Katherine Malmo manages with her linked narrative essays. One glance at her subtitle, "the realities of cancer, fish and demolition," and we know: this isn't your mother's cancer memoir.

Malmo is funny, though not on every page, and not in the *cancer-sucks-why-not-laugh* vein; rather, Malmo both clearly describes the private unrelenting accretion of small daily bodily horrors, and also surveys the effect they, and her new status, have on unrelated aspects of her life—welding, fly fishing, getting scammed, food, a lemon tree, and obsessive list-making.

Malmo's prose progresses both counterintuitively and utterly on target. The early chapters alternate from second to third person; but then, isn't an inflammatory breast cancer diagnosis (the worst kind) at age thirty-two best met, at first, with detachment? When she switches to first person, the earlier approach-avoidance mechanism has done its job: the reader knows, but also doesn't want to know, that this "Kate" and "You" have a name and of course, tragically, it is "I".

One is not, however, invited to this I's pity party, though her pain, anger, and sense of having been blindsided are palpable. Always, slightly underneath, is a generous intelligence of being open to the world, and a gritty acceptance that her world must now expand to make room for cancer, fear, hope, infertility, an altered marriage, and the gift and eventual gut-ache of gaining and losing new friends from a cancer support group.

Malmo is at turns wry, witty, quietly wise, and loudly resilient. In the chapter which bears the book's title, she writes about losing her body hair: "When your mother sees you, she will cry. She will buy you an expensive handbag because it makes you both feel better. You will call it the cancer bag. Later, you will buy cancer shoes, cancer earrings, and eventually a cancer

car.”

The kind and clear gift of this lovingly rendered book is not only about surviving cancer, but also that the unwelcome, terrible, and questionably survivable tragedies that visit every human life must not only be faced and handled, but *lived*.

Lisa Romeo