



A Close Encounter With the Angel of Death

Because "he jests at scars who never felt a wound," and because the dimension of personal experience might be thought to be conspicuous by its absence, I include here after much hesitation these candid excerpts from my personal diary written in the hospital where my wife and I suddenly found ourselves confronting a brain tumor in our five-year-old daughter. This excerpt, taken from my book *Love is Stronger Than Death*, was written before this "close encounter," not as a result of it. I include it simply as my other half: the book is my mind, this is my guts.

I

The first vision that burns unforgettably in my mind is the simple one of a locked door: the back door of our house. As my wife and I left that morning for the hospital tests that would show what was wrong with our daughter, a small, dark insect in my mind buzzed with worry. Our pediatrician had seen pressure in the back of her eyes that made him insist on an immediate appointment with a neurologist; and that was scary, even though her symptoms before the examination didn't seem terribly serious to us: poor morning appetite, naps, a dislike of gym, clumsy balance. The thought 'brain tumor' did not now escape us, but that thought seemed somehow foreign and incredible. But as I locked the back door of the house the thought pulled at my mind: Are you locking away the first half of your life today? Will you ever again in all of time return to this same house? Or will it be a totally different house, a different place in a different world? And when you return, will you be the same person, or will someone else who only looks like you open this door? Someone who looks alive but is really partly dead, a bit of a ghost, a wraith, a member of the kingdom of the dead? My precious daughter, my perfect one, if you are dying, so am I.

A second vision has the same meaning. It is a place on the highway, a junction, the place the turnpike begins that carries us into the city where she will have more tests. Shall I ever be able to pass that junction again without remembering? The thought was a knife, and it cut both my wife and me at the same time at the same place on the highway. 'Will the world ever be the same again? Are we turning a corner on our life's road that is a one-way street?

"You can't go home again" because when you come back, the rest of the world has made a half turn in the mean time. The night falls; suppose there is no dawn?

II

Strange how the mind fixates on physical details in order to handle the unhandleable. When we can't handle truth we handle facts. We miniaturize; we find some small objective correlative to associate with the unhandleably enormous subjective feeling. In this case it is the chair I was sitting in when the doctor came out of the CAT-scan room with the results of the computerized head X rays, while my wife was still in the X-ray room with my daughter. I will always remember the exact spot each chair leg occupied in the room. I will also remember the look on the doctor's face—an embarrassed look, a look not at me but vaguely around me, as if looking for help. It was as if he, not I, were the sufferer, or as if he were responsible for the bad news, the

"blame the messenger" syndrome. But I could not blame the messenger; he seemed no more comfortable delivering the message than I in receiving it.

Large brain tumor. What does that mean? Well, of course, this is not final or official; you will have to talk to Doctor so and so, I'm only a resident. Tell me everything you know; I have to know. It is cancerous? We can't be sure until we go in. Can it be removed? We don't know; even if it isn't malignant, it could be in the brain stem, inoperable. Facts, please, statistics. (When we can't take truth, we feed on facts.) Well, if it's inoperable, the life expectancy is from nine months to two to five years. And those years would be a gradual deterioration? Yes; but pain killers could make it painless . . . such a beautiful child-..., what a shame.

Suddenly, instead of forty pounds of life, I confronted forty pounds of death. No one on earth can prepare you for the feeling. It sounds terrible to say it, but now that it is all over, I am grateful for having been allowed to experience that horrible, hopeless feeling, the worst moment of my life. A sudden vision of months of irreversible degeneration, slow dying, with neither her nor us understanding why. Dying is harder to bear than death, and the dying of a child infinitely harder than the dying of the old. I knew then what despair was. It is not a thought, not even a feeling. It exists not in the brain or even the heart but in the stomach. I tasted despair in the gut. My stomach suddenly turned to mud and iron. The round world swooped away, fell into the lightless abyss like a trillion-ton stone. It seemed to drop out of my guts. My mud-and-iron stomach was somehow identical with that world, dropping an infinite distance, becoming incalculably remote and utterly inaccessible. Both world and guts dropped away from my eyes, my head, my mind: the knowledge of the truth. The truth could not be both known and felt at the same time. I had to split in half. If the truth had to be felt with the iron-and-mud gut, the same truth could not be accepted by the clear, thin light of the mind. For about two minutes I knew death as a stranger as a desperate reaction to death as an enemy, I knew the protective shell of withdrawal, a sanity-saving retreat from unbearable truth. This can't possibly be really happening to us. It's a bad dream. I can wake up in a minute, and it will all have gone away. The real world can't possibly be like that; it would be too absurd.

In that feeling, I am convinced, there is more than mere denial of death (though there is, of course, denial); there is also an affirmation. An affirmation that meaning and sense and goodness reign at the heart of reality, rather than absurdity. The "real world" didn't appear now as the heart of reality, as it usually does. Not that it was unreal, illusory; but that it was a surface, not the depths. There in the depths, at the bottom line, at the heart of all things, in the final analysis death and dying and doom and despair cannot be the truth, not the final truth. They are not illusions, but they are not truth either: they are masks.

It is a quite unverifiable assurance to anyone else; but to the one who knows it, it is beyond the need for verification. It is self-verifying. It is more than a wish, or even a hope; it is a prophetic fiat, an imperial absolute, a categorical imperative. For it is uttered by love. Love insists that contrary to appearances life holds the strings even of death. Our daughter may be dying; the affirmation does not insist that she is not as denial does. But it does insist that her dying is not her last word, the last truth.

This affirmation does not feel at all like an illusion or a defense mechanism, a denial of the truth; but precisely like an affirmation of the truth, a genuine insight into objective reality. In the face of the visible triumph of death, it proclaims an invisible kingdom. The ground of this proclamation is not my desires or even my beliefs but my seeing: some deep inner eye that remained in the very center of my being when my head and my guts fell apart, and that kept me together. It was neither

the head nor the guts that knew this, it was ME—center, heart, depth. Love comes from there; it was love that knew and affirmed her undying being.

But my guts meanwhile wanted to defecate. A perfect symbol, though a grotesque one. The physical dying was like stool, a true thing but a thing to be exuded from the living self, from the perfect body: "Death, thou shalt die." Death must be like that: the perfect immortal body putting away the used-up waste product of the mortal body, the living flushing away the dead.

But the dying body is there, and it is dying. Whether in two years or in ninety-two, it is dying. It makes no qualitative difference to the philosopher. But it makes a qualitative difference to the parent! Two years-in a flash, all their gut-wrenching sorrow, unendurable yet endured, all the hopeless details of a long and irreversible deterioration passed in my imagination. And as it did, a piece of common sense assured me that there is a real reason why this can't happen to us. We are not saints or heroes. We are cowards. We can't take this, and you get only what you can take. God may take us to the brink; but He will not take us over it. He will not let us fall.

Then the rational doubts chattered: won't He? Don't you see some go over the brink? And the deeper mind answered, Ah, but that is not the question. You have no assurances about anyone else, only yourself. Each has his own assurance because each has his own self and his own life. But, spoke the doubt, why couldn't He let you slip through His fingers? Because, triumphantly retorted the assurance, you are one of His fingers.

Yes, death is a mother and a lover, death is God's loving touch. My mind did not doubt this; it knew. But my feelings were weak, vacillating and uncertain in their trust. And my guts remained utterly unredeemed; they threatened to pull my mind and feelings down with them into the abyss together with that trillion ton stone that was my guts' world. The assurance was as far from my guts as I was from that stone falling away into the abyss, too far for my reach ever again to touch it.

"It" is not an *it*, it is you, my precious one, my baby. Where are you going? On what far, dark, and empty seas do you wander? Why can't I come with you? Where am I without you, with this you-shaped emptiness in me instead? Which of us is nowhere? How far is that from home?

III

She was allowed to come home for a day or two before being hospitalized for the operation. It was like a prisoner's last meal. We took her shopping for toys, for pajamas for the hospital, for dozens of infinitely precious little things, as the thought constantly tortured us to dry tears: Is this her last this? Her last that? We tried to make what might be her last normal day perfect. Today she can have whatever she wants. We know the books say this is wrong; but the books don't have a daughter who may be dying.

Our other children don't understand why we're so preoccupied and silent on this vacationlike shopping day. They know of the operation, but not of the nearness to death. We buy them special treats too, of course, and we worry about them too. Did we do right by them? (The dying of one and the thoughts it gives rise to seem somehow to envelop all.) Did we put second things first and first things second? Did we disobey the fundamental ethical imperative; did we love things and use people instead of vice versa? Did we forget that the things that seem to our senses to change and grow and move so quickly—our children—are really the solid, eternal things, and that the things that seem solid and important—house and car and *things*—are really the ephemeral things,

the mortal things? No, of course not; like all but the crazily wise, we habitually looked at the world inside out, upside down and backwards. The nearness of death is a harsh but effective teacher. And it teaches also a second lesson, not to mind but to heart: the infinite preciousness of life. When every little thing becomes perhaps the last, every little thing becomes a big thing. Why must we wait till death is near to see this? Walter de La Mare advises "Look thy last on all things lovely every hour." We thought, if this is the bad news we fear, we'll take her to Disneyland this summer, perhaps her last summer, certainly her last summer to travel semi-normally. Somehow we'll find the nonexistent money (death puts to death calculations). What a trip that would be: a thousand tearing, conflicting emotions, most of them without names. How raw the skin of our souls will be! A lot of psychic blood will be lost from our hearts; will any remain?

IV

The next image impressed on my memory is her mother camped out on the floor of her hospital room, not leaving her daughter's side day or night for weeks, patiently (she is not a patient person) enduring all her grouchiness, fussiness, and cussedness because it might be her last. Every word, every grouch is infinitely precious. Not because it is good but because it is hers. For love demands to be with her. Not even happiness is more precious to love than withness. "Better unhappy with her than happy without her" are the words of love.

It was easy and it was hard. The preciousness made it easy, necessary, inevitable. The pressure to act normal, not to break down, not to instill fear into her daughter, made it hard, very hard.

The mother lion guards her injured cub. She will not relax her vigil until all is well, though the whole world may sneer and call her unreasonable and overprotective. That is a judgment on the world, not on her. For she is enacting a mystery, a ritual that is larger and older than the world. Not only in her own name does she act, but also as representative for something transcendental, a mystery the human race has always felt and known until these times of uprootedness: Motherhood with a capital M, a metaphysical force of which human mothers are mere carriers. Her vocation speaks with authority—an absolute, and imperative, a divine revelation.

V

In her mother's arms outside the operating room, she fell asleep after a double dose of preliminary anaesthesia and double the expected time. We sang to her and spoke to her, as she drowsed off peacefully, of all the good things in her past and all the good things in her future. My voice cracked; when love and sorrow meet, the combustion cracks many things, including hearts and voices. I hope I didn't scare her. Finally, she slept and we gave her up to her surgeon, her fate, and her God.

Would this be the last time we would ever see her with hope? Would this be the last time we could see a twenty-year-old face behind her five-year-old face? Would this be the last time, even, we would see her alive? Operating tables aren't the safest places in the world, despite doctors' assurances.

When her head finally fell back and her eyelids drooped, it seemed almost as if she had died to us right then and there, although of course our minds told us it was only the anaesthesia working as it was supposed to work. And when the anaesthesiologist gently lifted her stone-still form from her mother's arms where she had fallen asleep so trustingly and almost contentedly, it was like an offering, a ritual sacrifice. They wheeled her away on a table, and it seemed as if the Angel of

Death had accepted the sacrifice. When the table turned the corner into the operating room and we could follow it no longer, we turned our last corner. We had done all we could do. Our work was over, except to believe and to pray. Our physical part played out, we were played out. We let go, collapsed in each other's arms, and wept wordlessly.

One more scene etched unforgettably on the defenseless mind. The trusting child falling asleep—was it on the lap of Mother Life or Mother Death? The sleeping child—was it the sleep of healing or the sleep of dying? The taken-away child—was it just another step away from us, from her life, from her world, a step closer to death? The take-away scene looked like a little death.

Everything is a little death, a step toward the one end awaiting us all. But must it be now? *Now* makes a qualitative difference. Ivan Ilyitch found that out. Is she so precious to Heaven that they can't wait for her? And what about us? Aren't we precious? Not too precious, I hope, not ready to be initiated into the greater mysteries of suffering yet. But she—the heavenly magnet seems to draw to itself the heavenly substance of her being, as if she were too heavenly to be on our dark earth for very long.

All we can do is to beg for the gift to be returned. We now know three things: whose gift it is, how infinitely precious it is, and what beggars we are.

VI

No one ever told me how incredibly similar grief and joy feel. Both are tired, numb, timeless, limbo feelings, a sheer state of "be-ing" with nothing added.

When we received the news that she was alive, the tumor was benign, and had been completely removed, we just grinned for eight straight hours. We stared smilingly at her beautiful living form. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. It looked like a turkey, with puffy eyes, shaved hair, and all sorts of tubes stuffed into her; yet never has anyone ever looked so beautiful to me. Nothing more was needed, nothing could be added; she was perfect. It was like having another baby, a new life.

How crazily close are the borders of heaven and hell on earth. From having lived on the rim of hell, thinking dead thoughts from a dead heart, I suddenly found myself closer to the rim of heaven than ever before. My child, whom I counted as dead, is alive again; the one who was lost is found. I shared the joy of the father of the prodigal son, of the shepherd finding the lost sheep, and perhaps even of God the Father at the resurrection of His Son. A remote but real beam of light from the heavenly sun.

In the light of life-and-death, how far away the near little things of the day become, and how near the far, great things of the night! The black light that death shines onto life is a clear light, an enlightening light. The country of the dead, from whose borders we have just returned, dispenses a great grace, a gift of vision, a third eye, a dimension of depth, a metaphysical X-ray. Death is the deepest place, and it enables love to speak its word *de profundis*, from the depths, from the deepest place of all. It adds a *basso profundo* to love's soprano, and all things work together in ultimate harmony.

Let us sing.