

Angels We Have Heard

I was preparing to write a holiday essay, as I sometimes do, when suddenly Susan died. Now I can't do what I planned. I just can't. I have to tell you about her.

Born healthy in 1948, Susan chewed on the windowsills as a toddler in southern Maine. Doctors blamed lead poisoning for the cerebral palsy that soon made her head wobble, her voice shake and her legs contort. She spent her childhood in and out of surgery and learning to walk. Big-eyed and obese all her life, she hurtled across rooms on pointed toes, propelled by crutches, barely (but always) missing the china and alarming strangers until she smiled.



"AFA" (A Friend Always)

I met Susan just after I graduated from university and secured a small grant to start a children's art program in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. One day I walked into the local day care center to introduce myself, but no one came forward to welcome me until suddenly there was Susan, poised and professional, asking, "May I help you?"

That was June; by September we were close friends. I knew all her hopes and fears, her disappointments and dreams and she knew mine. Her secrets will go to my grave. What I can tell you is this: No one ever loved life more. Picture Susan in a glass elevator, shrieking all the way up, all the way down, and at the bottom laughing herself silly. Think of Susan tucking into a lobster. Susan flirting with cute guys. Susan beside me in a car, riding over the crest of Mt. Rose in Nevada and, seeing Lake Tahoe below for the first time, saying, almost in a whisper, "Oh, Gail."

She taught me a lot. About gratitude for small pleasures. About forgiveness (She was good at it.). About acceptance for what we cannot change. If angels are messengers of God, who is to say what form they might take?

In 1970 Susan lost her job at the day care center when funding dried up. Options were few, challenges many, so she moved back home to her parents. She stayed 20 years, watching for cars to pull up, talking on the phone, and stepping out twice a week to the senior center, where she oversaw the cash box and made new friends. In her 40s a stroke put her in a wheelchair and sent her to a succession of nursing homes, each one farther from her family. After she had a kidney removed, her diaphragm shut down and she could no longer breathe without a ventilator. Last May surgeons amputated a leg. They found some horrible cancer, and in six months, two weeks ago, Susan was gone.

Don't be sad. This isn't a story about earthly suffering. It's about the triumph of the spirit, the reason for the season. It's about singing "Joy to the World" full on, even if you're way off key. It's about giving; if Susan had two dollars she bought a stamp and a greeting card (Signed "AFA, Susan." A friend always.). And, it's about love. Susan could spot a phony a mile away, but when she did love she did it unconditionally. Seventy people came to the funeral. We should all be so lucky.

So. This is my holiday wish for you: That you may have a friend this loyal, a heart this big and a life as deeply felt as Susan's.