

## **The Geography of Illness** by Rosalie de Rosset

“Sickness,” wrote the great American writer Flannery O’Connor, “is more instructive than a long trip to Europe. And again she noted, “Those who do not suffer sickness before they die miss out on one of God’s greatest mercies.” Flannery O’Connor, of course, knew what she was talking about; she was not sentimentalizing her plight with spiritual cliché or chirpy platitudes. After all, in her twenties, in the middle of a promising writing career and already the friend of many famous poets and novelists, she went home to her mother’s farm in Millidgeville, Georgia with degenerative Lupus, a disease her father had died of before her. There she spent over a decade writing her inimitable novels, short stories, essays and letters, her feet and legs often in buckets of warm water to keep the pain down. Yet, her life as reflected in her letters was filled with humor and courage, both born of suffering. She died at only 39 years of age leaving behind her a legacy of writing that has remained internationally well-known and continues to stimulate those readers who take the time to understand her unusual vision of life. Of one thing there is no question; she looked at her life theologically, with a vision informed by a close relationship with God.

I would never presume to compare my recent experience to O’Connor’s prolonged, pain-filled, even heroic life. But, an unexpected and somewhat traumatic brush with mortality including in its wake several days in intensive care, the helplessness of being in everyone else’s hands, the misery of hospitals, and a substantial recovery time have given me a taste of what O’Connor meant, just a taste, but one I will never forget. This was a before and after time which remains haunting. It’s a loss of innocence, the innocence of taking one’s body for granted. Now, I have to think about what I feel all the time, at least for awhile. One day I was biking down the lakefront on a lyrical autumn afternoon, the sky that magical color of blue that hints of a summer past, filled with longing. I felt lucky to live so near the loveliness of harbors sporting elegant sailboats; I was enjoying the happy sounds of people cooking on grills, playing volleyball and soccer in the park system, exhilarated by other bikers and skaters whizzing by. The next morning I was stretched on a table hearing the news that I would need open heart surgery, three words it had never occurred to me would mark my experience. After all, I’m the one who exercised, took several flights of stairs several times a day, ate basically well, and whose energy sometimes exhausts my friends. These are words that shot and still shoot terror into my system. The first picture, of course that came to mind was of my sternum being sawed in two (the brochure calls it divided—one of the bigger understatements I have heard in my life.) As one nurse said to me in an unguarded moment, “they really do use a real saw.”

I remember little of that first day before surgery—in a hospital room I lay still, thinking random thoughts none of which I can remember. The next morning, however, the mercy O’Connor talks about, began trickling into my consciousness at that crucial time when one is dazed by the looming unknown. The phone began to ring. Each time on the end of the line was someone who was calling to say they cared, dear friends, acquaintances, and in some cases people I barely knew—this especially still dazzles me. And, what still stays with me is the way people prayed for me—I cannot write these words without tears—bringing me hope and comfort...yes comfort—the soothing of my frightened spirit. And...so yes, this is a mercy I could not have known in another way—a trip that was I know clearly, God-intended. That’s where I’ve been. For Prime Time America, this is Rosalie de Rosset.