

In Her Own Time

At least ten years ago now, I was sitting in Cafe Roma, one of the nicest restaurants in Cleveland, TN, waiting for one of my literature colleagues. We were hosting a visiting writer for the university where we taught, and the others of us were already there. I was the only one sitting facing the door, and I was paying close attention to when Susan would arrive. We were making that basic conversation one makes with somebody one is trying to make welcome, while also knowing we'll never really see each other ever again, when Susan walked in. Since I was the only one facing the door, I was the only one who saw her fall.

Susan had been struggling with speech and mobility issues over the previous couple of years. When she first told our department about it, she pointed out that it wasn't noticeable to anyone other than her. There was a momentary lapse between what her brain wanted to say and its coming out of her mouth. Not long after she told us about this development, though, we could all see that delay, in addition to the way it was spreading throughout her body. It took several years for her to get the diagnosis that she had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, but, by then, we all knew whatever she had was awful, taking away an erudite woman's voice, then her life. At the time, though, we weren't sure what was happening to her, just that she was slowly losing the ability to do what she loved.

When I saw her fall, I calmly excused myself from the table and went to help her up. While I made my exit from the table as if nothing was wrong, I moved quickly from that point on. I was hoping to be able to help Susan get up before anybody noticed, as, somehow, nobody in the restaurant had seen it happen. The setup of the restaurant is strange in that customers enter through a side door, but there were still enough people facing that direction that I was surprised none of them had seen her fall. Or perhaps some people did, and they just didn't want to draw

attention to her. That was certainly my focus. Having been raised in the South, just like Susan, I knew that causing a scene is one of the many-more-than-seven deadly sins of Southern life.

I got to her quickly, knelt down, and began pulling her up. Even though she was having trouble speaking, I could clearly understand the one word she said: *Wait*. I didn't, and I kept trying to get her up. She said it again. Then again. Then I listened. I stopped tugging at her and simply knelt there and did what she asked. I waited.

Susan was never one to rush anything. Though I was never able to see her teach, I heard from people who had that she could ask questions, then wait patiently for students to think deeply enough to come up with a more-than-superficial answer than they would give if she hurried them. She was the rare teacher who was comfortable with silence: her own and others'. Another professor told me a story about team-teaching with her early in his career. He described how she could stand in front of class and look for a passage, calmly turning pages until she finally found it. I remember being surprised by that ability, as I knew that I never did that. If I couldn't find something after a few seconds, I would just explain to the students what I was looking for, then move on to something else. I felt like the energy of the class would flag if I didn't keep the ideas flowing.

In the same way, Susan took her time getting up that evening. Even when the owner of the restaurant realized what had happened and came around to help, Susan continued moving at her own pace. It would be easy for someone who didn't know Susan to attribute that to the disease that was taking away her ability to move quickly, as I'm sure the restaurant owner did. It was clear Susan couldn't move as quickly as she once did, and it was clear something was wrong with her. However, Susan would have chosen to move at the necessary pace regardless of her health.

Unlike most of us, Susan was comfortable with who she was. She knew herself, and she lived her life according to that knowledge. It's not that she didn't continue to try to grow and push herself, but she did so from a deep awareness of who she was supposed to be. Most of us spend our lives striving to be somebody we're not. Most of us chafe against the restrictions life has put on us. Most of us can't honestly admit who we are, faults and all. Susan knew all of that about herself, and she lived her life trying to be the best version of that person she could.

Early in my time working with her, I was sitting near her during a faculty meeting. A professor who had taught at the school for decades was retiring, and he addressed the faculty. He made a number of comments I disagreed with, and it was clear there were at least a few of us in the room that was true for. When he finished, though, everybody gave him a standing ovation, celebrating his four decades of teaching there. I stood up, even though I didn't want to. I told myself it was because I was new, and I didn't want to draw attention to how out of place I felt there, a feeling that would become clearer with each passing year I stayed. Susan didn't stand, nor did she applaud. She didn't draw attention to herself, but she also didn't join in. She just sat there with her self-knowledge, unwilling to stand, unwilling to let anybody else pull her to her feet.

Bio:

Kevin Brown has published three books of poetry: *Liturgical Calendar: Poems*; *A Lexicon of Lost Words*; and *Exit Lines*. He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again*, and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*.