

Book Reviews

***My Foreign Cities: A Memoir*
by Elizabeth Scarborough
2014 Chautauqua Literary Prize Winner
Reviewed by Mo H Saidi**

In *My Foreign Cities: A Memoir*, Elizabeth Scarborough details more than a decade of facing a fatal disease that gradually brings down the high school sweetheart who becomes her live-in partner and then her husband. The work focuses on three dimensions of her life during those trying times: her relationship with her husband Stephen, the impact of cystic fibrosis on his life, and her effort to cope with the illness. Although Scarborough is in love with Stephen and admires his courage in facing the burden of his progressive and fatal disease, their relationship is not as romantic as one might expect. She is a vegetarian, he a meat eater and chews tobacco; she is a runner, he a fishing addict; she likes pop music, he prefers heavy metal. What connects them is a pragmatic love that is as solid as it can get. Initially, their friendship was based on mutual respect.

Scarborough initially plans to avoid marriage and children at all costs: "I picture myself as an international journalist, moving from country to country and boyfriend to boyfriend." She dreams of visiting foreign cities near and far. When she and Stephen eventually choose each other as intimate friends after a period of casual dating, despite his poor prognosis, Stephen looks strong. She writes, "But he was strangely healthy. He took enzymes with his meals, and though his cough was deep, every time he went to the clinic in Denver the doctor told him his lungs were as good as any kid's on the street."

In 1970, when he was a child, the doctors didn't expect him to live to ten. "Stephen knew, as a kid, that he had Cystic Fibrosis..." She writes that his parents let him do everything healthy kids did. It helped that "his father was a doctor, after all." Despite frequent bickering, Scarborough and Stephen get along so well that "CF did not play into the equation at all." She adds that it might have been so because in her mind she had vowed not to marry anyone. Her family also treats Stephen as a boyfriend, an enjoyably temporary "interloper." However, when Stephen visits her during her first year at the University of Chicago, she falls in love with him and suddenly finds herself "in the middle of something I'd sworn I'd never do." When she discusses the matter with her professor, a doctor, he tells her that "There won't be a chart that can predict how your boyfriend will live." Stephen then experiences the first collapse of his lungs, his first serious encounter with CF. Soon this and other problems take him to emergency rooms and hospitals.

During one of the breaks when palliative surgeries had prevented lung collapse and created a period of improvement in Stephen's health, he proposes marriage, catching her off guard, "He knew I wanted to be with him and that I hated the idea of marriage; he was ruining otherwise unruinable moments." Sometime later when she changes her mind and asks Stephen to marry her, his reaction is appropriately skeptical: "You're kidding me?" They hastily plan the marriage ceremony with reflec-

tive and realistic vows that reflect Stephen's tenuous health.

This memoir is strikingly honest and descriptive. The struggle for life glows prominently on page after page. The realistic expectations, the efforts by the doctors to provide optimal and up-to-date care, and the effective support of family members and numerous friends keep the couple in a positive mood. After a successful double lung transplant, Stephen's physical situation improves dramatically. After surgery, Scarborough stares at Stephen and feels elated to see his body. Even the extensive scar seems beautiful: "the curve of its line like a river."

Scarborough is not an iron woman. The weight of the disease and the long days of struggle to deal with cystic fibrosis finally get to her and send her into an episode of deep depression. Fortunately the same approach that has prolonged Stephen's life comes to her rescue. Medical intervention, rest, and support of family and friends enable her to go on and recover satisfactorily. Stephen takes upward of thirty different medications to suppress his body's rejection of the transplant. However, dangers loom everywhere: "a simple common cold, mold in dust could kill him." Stephen passes the threshold of living thirty years, the average life expectancy for patients with cystic fibrosis, but soon his days become numbered when a rare infection fills his lungs and affects his kidneys and heart.

This memoir is a sober lesson, a case study for thousands of families who have a member or a friend who's suffering from serious illness. Although medical innovations, new drugs, and miraculous transplant surgery help prolong life for these patients, as shown in this book, what most improves the quality of life for these patients are supportive family, dedicated friends, and love. As Scarborough has revealed in this book, in the face of certain demise, it is love that matters most, that makes every moment of living happy and immortal.

To see the Chautauqua Literary Prize Presentation to Elizabeth Scarborough, go to youtu.be/vml0kBp58TM.

Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a life-threatening genetic disease that primarily affects the lungs and digestive system. An estimated 30,000 children and adults in the United States (70,000 worldwide) have CF. More than 75 percent of people with CF are diagnosed by age 2. In people with CF, a defective gene and its protein product cause the body to produce unusually thick, sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and leads to life-threatening lung infections. To read more visit www.cff.org/aboutcf.

The Chautauqua Prize is an annual American literary award established by the Chautauqua Institution in 2012. The winner receives US \$7,500 and all travel and expenses for a one-week summer residency at Chautauqua. It is a "national prize that celebrates a book of fiction or literary/narrative nonfiction that provides a richly rewarding reading experience and honors the author for a significant contribution to the literary arts." As author of the winning book, Scarborough enjoyed the benefits of the award and hosted a public reading and book signing on the Institution grounds. See more at www.ciweb.org/prize#sthash.QH00e6Iy.dpuf.

We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. – Winston Churchill

