

# The Talisman

By Susan Ferguson



We were distant cousins until illness finally closed the gap. We were born the same year, Kate a few months later, but we grew up three states apart. I only saw Kate once as a child, during a sweltering Dallas summer, when my family came to visit from California. We were both eleven, with blond bobs, mini skirts and go-go boots. I slept in her room for a week, my brother with hers down the hall, and we became fast friends. By the end of our stay, even her southern drawl did not sound so strange.

But we quickly returned to our separate lives, and forgot our promises to write. Only when the family photo tumbled out of the annual Christmas card did we remember each other, and that we were somehow linked.

Years later, in our thirties, I saw Kate again. She came to Santa Barbara for a visit and stayed with my mother. Her life had been haunted by tragedy since our last encounter. When Kate was in her first year of college, her sixteen-year-old brother killed himself. At fourteen he had developed a craving for heroin and was eventually sent off to military school by his desperate parents. He was found hanging from the ceiling in his dorm room a few months later.

More recently both Kate's mother and stepfather were taken by cancer. She had stayed by their sides, unable to stop their slow slipping away. Shortly after their deaths, her marriage ended and she found herself more alone than she'd ever been.

From that Santa Barbara visit I can only recall one afternoon, sitting together in the glancing sunlight on my mother's back lawn. The sweet sound of her slow Texan drawl,

the clink of ice in our tall lemonades, the curl of smoke rising from her cigarette, and her determination to press on.

News about Kate always reached me through my mother, who was also now mother to Kate. Breast cancer struck. Mastectomy and radiation. Three good years. Then a lump in her neck appeared, after she returned from Venice. It was her last vacation, and we were so glad she'd gone.

Cancer now infiltrated Kate's lymph system and was spreading into every organ in her body. She endured round after round of chemotherapy, brought each time to the edge of death in the doctors' desperate bid to halt the relentless invasion. By the time she recovered sufficiently to keep a meal down, a new round of chemo and then radiation would knock her down again.

Kate's plight was so horrific, I sidestepped the news. What could I do? How could I relate? And then I was knocked down myself, by a different disease.

Myasthenia Gravis. The English translation: "severe muscle weakness". I was told that my immune system was attacking nerve receptors as though they were the enemy. My muscles began to fail me until I found myself too weak to move. I lay nearly motionless in bed, concentrating on my breathing and gathering strength to say a few garbled words. I had a full time nurse after I came home from the hospital. No one knew what to expect. Would I walk again, regain my speech and use of my eyes? I found myself thinking of Kate during those long days, and hungered to talk with her.

The day arrived when I was strong enough to sit up for short periods and hold a stout pen. I labored intensely over the shape of each letter, working to slow thoughts to the snail pace of my trembling hand. I finally shared common ground with my cousin and my urge to connect with her was intense. After several hours and frequent rests, I scrawled my name at the bottom of the page. I can only recall a few lines from that letter.

*Kate, I'm not facing the same dangers you are. I don't have to imagine saying goodbye. How are you dealing with the fear of death? How do you know whether to keep fighting or surrender?*

My letter was inspired by Prednisone. At the time, I was on high doses of the steroid which had the effect a truth serum. I found myself blurting out strong feelings I never knew I held, and treading ground I'd have cautiously avoided before. I knew I was stretching my tenuous bond with Kate, but I also sensed that we might be running out of time.

Eagerly I awaited her response. Weeks passed and nothing arrived in the mail. My mother reported that Kate was touched by my letter and she would try to write back. Meanwhile the cancer kept growing, reaching its tentacles up into her brain. *I was getting stronger.*

Then one day it arrived, a letter from Kate. I eagerly ripped open the envelope and removed a card. A coin-sized medal dropped out. She was glad to hear I was getting stronger. She wished me the very best. She now had severe headaches. She was hoping to get into a clinical trial in Houston. It was her best chance at recovery....She was sending an angel medallion to watch over and protect me. Love, Karen.

I closed the card, disappointed. I turned over the little pewter medallion in my hand and saw the embossed figure of an angel in mid flight. Religious superstition. Had this object been blessed by a priest? A version of the Christopher medal I'd seen hung around necks of the faithful and pulled up into view to be kissed on important occasions. Did she really think I would wear something like this?

I tried not to be hurt that my questions went unanswered. Maybe she needed to believe in this last hope before she could face the other possibility.

A few weeks later she was rejected for the Houston trial. Her cancer was too far advanced for their study. Her own doctors now told her there would be no further radiation, no more chemo. No hope of recovery. Just medicine to ease the pain.

I wrote Kate one more letter, acknowledging her grief. I worried that she'd feel guilty about giving up the fight, disappointing friends who had cheered her on. I didn't expect an answer this time.

A few months later, I got the news from my mother. Kate had checked herself into the hospital and died quietly two days later. She'd gone peacefully and I felt relieved that my cousin's intense suffering was over. Oddly, nothing more.

A month later I was on a vacation with my husband in the Sierras. We returned to the resort where we had cross country skied each winter. Now it was summer and we brought my walker. Most days I was able to shuffle from our car to the shore of a roadside lake, where we sat for hours taking in the view. We had just returned from one of these 'hikes' and I was resting in the darkened bedroom of the cabin, my husband gone for groceries.

And then it hit me. Kate would never get another chance to inhale the sweet aroma of a forest floor, or to watch reflections skip across a lake. Her life had been snuffed out at age forty-three, while mine continued. "*It wasn't fair! She deserved better!*" something in me sobbed. I suddenly recalled the medallion she'd sent me, and realized with a pang I had never thanked her sufficiently for it. And at that minute I knew I had lost it, along with her precious note. I could almost hear Kate's slow lilting laughter.

After we returned from the mountains I searched our house. Where was her medal lying now? Was it buried alongside scraps of cardboard and rotting food in a mountain of rubbish at the city dump? How had I been so blind to its value? And what were those few words to me on her note? Her last communication. Lost.

A year passed and I clung to the roller coaster of my health. Another hospital stay followed by complete recovery, but then the weakness crept back. By summertime I'd been walking without a cane for several months and knew it was time to return to work.

But what type of work? The fast track demands of my previous job were no longer manageable for me. I had worked as a hotel designer, an exciting career that saw me traveling frequently and spending many late nights and weekends in the office. I hadn't seen the hidden cost to my health at the time. I was no longer so naïve.

Moreover, since my illness, the inlay detail of a registration desk or the curve of a chandelier no longer held their earlier fascination for me. I could never care about deadlines for my hotel designs the way I had before. Now it seemed like a lot of frenzy over nothing terribly important.

Through my cloud of confusion a voice whispered, "*Become a writer!*" Long forgotten memories emerged of a small girl crouched in bed late at night, holding a flashlight under the covers. Her light shines on a tiny note pad. She is writing, furiously, as the story unfolds. Queens and castles, evil witches and crucial tests of character. For years she presented the same gift to her family on special occasions: a new book of poems or stories, illustrated. She could barely keep up with the torrent of fiction bursting to come out. When had it ended? And why? I couldn't remember. But I knew that I had been a writer, once, and I could be again.

The first step was to clear out my office at home. For two years since my illness, I had only entered this room to stash papers that would someday be filed, and to paint and draw when I felt the urge. Now I removed my drafting board, no longer needed, and had it hauled it out to the garage. I gasped at the space revealed on the large table below, and felt the room already expanding.

I bundled together rolls of blueprints and unpinned favorite house plans from the walls. I reorganized shelves of old drawings and artwork. Landscape plans, furniture designs, figure drawings. So many avenues I had pursued with a passion. So many promising beginnings. Were they all dead ends? Would my writing be one more path leading nowhere?

Next I tackled the neglected scrapheap of bills and records on the desk, mementos to be saved but soon forgotten. I had almost finished the pile when I took a break and brewed a pot of tea in the kitchen. When I returned to my office a few minutes later, mug in hand, I saw a small shiny object set out in the middle of my nearly cleaned desk. As I drew closer, I recognized the medallion Kate had sent me a year earlier.

The room was silent, yet the medallion's presence was deafening. It sat silvery and triumphant on the white table, announcing its arrival with shocking understatement, as though it had been there all along. How had it fallen so far from the pile without making a sound? My only explanation was utterly irrational: an unseen hand must have moved it into position while I was out of the room.

I reached for the medal, and felt the bumpy contours of its tiny angel with my thumb. Over and over I stroked this figure, trying to sense any lingering trace of Kate's imprint, knowing she must have rubbed it similarly. Had this medallion belonged to Kate? Had she sent me her own treasured guardian? As I held the precious object I knew I was being given a rare second chance, an opportunity to connect with my cousin in a way I'd been incapable of before.

Once reunited with my lost gem, I couldn't bear to be parted from it for even a moment. I didn't find Kate's card, but for two days I carried the talisman everywhere with me.

It was safely nestled in the front pocket of my jeans when I drove downtown to the New Age store. There I inspected bulging displays of amulets and inscribed stones, good luck charms and religious trinkets. But nothing even similar to my angel medallion. I waited

while a group of chatty women purchased amber earrings and sitar tapes at the counter, then slowly made their way out of the store, stopping to finger silk scarves and hemp purses along the way. Finally I drew my treasure out of my pocket.

“Can you tell me what this is?” I asked the soft-spoken woman behind the counter.

She took the medal and turned it over carefully in her palm. “Ahh... These are very rare and almost impossible to find now.”

“Is it religious? Christian?”

“No. Not any particular faith, but the angel is common to a lot of traditions... It’s beautiful, isn’t it? You’re very lucky to have one.”

As I left the store it dawned on me that the medallion had been Kate’s answer to my inquiry about death. The angel she sent was no messenger of religious dogma, but a part of herself. My cousin’s heart was the size of Texas, and at that moment I could feel it pulsing through the little angel in my hand.

Back from the store, I had to give my talisman a secure home or risk losing it again. I placed it back on my desk in the same spot where it had magically reappeared. My office was now completely cleaned and ready for its new incarnation, with dictionary and thesaurus in place. I sat down and wrote my first story.

Years have passed now and the stories still come. The little pewter medallion sits next to me on the desk, its angel quietly observing me. When my writing comes to a resting place, my hand reaches over and strokes the tiny figure. The medal has become a touchstone for me, allowing me entrance into a hidden world. As I write, I see glimpses of half hidden imagery, truths that dance just beyond my sight, beckoning me to follow.

I asked Kate about death; she answered with love, and sent me the courage to cross over into the creative unknown. The brightly burnished angel is both my departed cousin and the little girl who knew how to fly on wings of words; she has become my companion, my guardian, and my muse.

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