

Marq de Villiers

Coastal Lives: a memoir by Marjorie Simmins
(Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press,
2014, 192 pp., \$19.95).

There are so many ways in which this book could have gone wrong — so many inbuilt structural and conceptual hazards facing its telling. First of all, it is a memoir, and memoir-writing, in this age of full frontal social media, can be a high-risk endeavor, too often lapsing into lists of the inconsequential, recountings of the mundane, and earnest explainings of the obvious, especially when the writer is concerned with expressing personal reflection rather than describing outer engagement with the world. (Still, Simmins teaches memoir writing, and I should have figured she would bring it off). Second, the love affair at the heart of this book is one with a 22-year age difference between the two parties, and defensiveness and a tendency to over-explain is lamentably normal under such circumstances. Third is the looming presence of the Unfairly Dead Ex Wife; it can be devilishly difficult to avoid mawkishness in dealing with grief and a spouse left bereft — the gap between petty resentment on the one hand and self-effacement on the other is very narrow. Then there are the accidents and illnesses along the way, raising in a wary reader's mind the suspicion that we are about to descend into self-pity, which is always merely tiresome for an outsider.

I really wanted to love this book, but for all the reasons outlined above, feared it would fall short. So much risk! I wanted to love it partly because I know Marjorie Simmins slightly, but well enough to know that she is

a genuinely nice person as well as a pretty good writer, and I've known Don Cameron for many a decade, and have followed with interest his long evolution from a slightly flashy magazine writer to a public intellectual with real depth.

So how did she do?

It greatly helps that her main narrative purpose is so clear, and that by and large the digressions she permits herself help and don't hinder this purpose. The story is simple in its essence: West Coast writer, BC bred, a freelance writer specializing in, of all things, fisheries, but with a talent that shows itself in flashes as she publishes occasional essays outside her specialty, is sent to interview Famous Writer, who is in BC from Nova Scotia on a book tour. He is a generation older than she is, and happily, even besottedly, married, as soon becomes clear. Still, they hit it off, they exchange essays, books, writings, musings; and so it would have ended, except that as their friendship evolved, Don's beloved wife Lulu died of cancer and left him in mourning, hardly able to cope, a naturally happy man unfairly struck dumb by dumb accident of fate. Some of the best passages in the book, and the most perceptive, are those that describe his anguish, and loss, and finally his resilience. Simmins is wise enough to know that Lulu was never going to leave them even after they became a couple, but wise enough, too, to understand that in the end it didn't matter; she would in time be a benign presence, not an intrusion, a source of comfort and not just of loss. In these passages, Simmins needs tact, delicacy and deep wells of empathy, and by and large she finds them.

Here, for example, is a passage from Simmins's description of her first sail with her new husband during her first summer in Cape Breton. In the boat's galley, she catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror. "My face was warm and rosy from a day in the sun. I rarely feel pretty, but I was pretty in that moment, even beautiful. Looking into the small mirror above the sink, I saw sun-bleached hair, jade-blue eyes and a mouth that had been kissed into puffiness." Then ... she felt, she says, a gentle kiss on the cheek. That's where this passage could have descended into bathos, and indeed fleetingly flirts with it: "I've always known it was Lulu, saying goodbye to her guy and their boat — and saying hello to me. I think my feet were planted right where hers had been, so many times; it was just so easy for her to touch me ... The kiss said, It's all right now, isn't it? I don't have to worry about him any more, do I? All I could manage was a nod. Then many little nods in succession, seen only by her. My cheek felt different all that evening."

There it is: "My cheek felt different all that evening." The deftness of that final phrase redeems all that went before, and enables all that

follows.

One of Simmins's strengths as a writer, as this passage demonstrates, is her ability to quit a paragraph or a longer anecdote at just the right time (to know when enough is just enough), a device that greatly helps her to overcome the inbuilt hazards described in the first paragraph of this review. There are many examples in the text. One of them, lyrical and deceptively simple, comes in the very last passage of the book. Simmins is walking in the woods with her still-newish husband and their two dogs, after a long recovery from a debilitating accident. "I felt ... limber and heedless — untouchable by malevolent gods. This is our human birthright, I believe, to stride into each day, believing that the world will welcome, not wound us ... In that place of forest healing, warm air circled around us, pushed by seasonally mild breezes off the Atlantic. I could breathe with no pain or discomfort; I literally grew taller, breathing into the lost half-inch of height taken from me two years and one month ago, retrieved by walking and stretching. Around us Haligonians walked dogs of every type, breed and age. Don held McTavish's leash, I held Franki's leash. We walked along, hips grazing, two Maritimers and their dogs."

Perfect.

It isn't all completely successful. I was never quite persuaded that Cape Breton and the Maritimes could be that different, even alien, to a BC-born woman. The sense of wonder she expresses at the differences seems wide-eyed and oddly parochial; a skillful and experienced journalist, as she was, should surely have been more worldly than that. And not all her interpolations into the narrative — excerpts from her earlier writings and columns — are successful. Some were — essays and letters about and to one of her sisters, tragically dead at an early age, help to amplify and extend the main emotional tug of her story. So does her rueful telling of how she met and spent a decade with a commercial fisherman (after a more or less disastrous encounter in a bar), and her affectionate memories of her father. But some weren't so successful. I'm still not sure why we should care that she struggled to give up smoking; other people's struggles with addiction are almost always tiresome, and hers is no exception.

In the end, though, that's a small fault. I wanted to love this book, and rather to my relief, I did. Simmins writes with wit, with a great eye for the telling detail, and with emotional intelligence. She's not always easy on herself, and her recounting of how (in pre-Don days) she left a fiancé just days before their wedding is hard for an outsider to read. But she's wonderful on her friends, her horses and dogs, and on her love. Lucky guy, Don.