

# Phoenix Complaining

*by* Rebecca Coffey

My friend Diane says that a common theme in my writing is the proximity of evil, illness, and death to joy, recovery, and rebirth.

My brother Dan, whose breathing becomes perilously labored when he walks up even a slight incline but who is still, I can joyfully report, living a full life and looking forward to retiring to Nicaragua, says that my writing is so terse and lacking in adjectives and adverbs that my short stories read like story summaries.

My brilliant editor, Ruth, who has cropped, spiky brown hair, enormous dark eyes, and a wonderfully tentative, inquisitive air that couples shamelessly with a habit of speaking so economically that she might as well be a telegraph, seems to like me. But who knows? One can never tell. On a glorious Manhattan day last year, the kind that reminds one of the near perfection of the Tuesday morning nine years ago that was shattered by the chaos of what we all now numbly refer to as "the events of 911," she wrote delicately in the finest blue pen in the margins of one of my sorry excuses for a manuscript, "You are sometimes repetitive." An innocent editorial comment?

My silver-haired, tall, Nordic goddess of a mother (who is also the mother of my brother Dan, whose breathing becomes perilously labored when he walks up even a slight hill but who is still, I can joyfully report, living a full life and looking forward to retiring to Nicaragua) is a little tippy when she walks. That's because she is, as she proudly says, "one of the Very Old." She was raised on the plains of South Dakota during the Dust Bowl. The younger half of the family on the farm next door starved to death, but she and her family were able to survive the hard years by eating undressed lard on unsliced bread. At age 89, my mother sees every day as a gift. She and her slightly-younger, ever-spry, boyfriend (whose life is another story summary) feed the bright red hummingbirds buzzing impatiently about their balcony high above bustling, trendy

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Piedmont Avenue at the beginning of the incline of the Oakland Hills. My mother has not read much of what I write, but what she has read, she has declared "brilliantly punctuated."

I seem to be at a crisis in this cursed writing life of mine[exclamation point] I am too depressed to squeeze another uncannily inspiring observation out of my pert[comma] sassy self[semi-colon] I waiver hysterically between feverish confidence and a painful[comma] stagnant gloom regarding my chances of ever escaping the miasma of the only marginally published during these dire economic times[period] My brother Dan [open parenthesis]whose breathing becomes perilously labored when he walks up even a slight incline but who is still[comma] I can joyfully report[comma] living a full life and looking forward to retiring to Nicaragua[close parenthesis] is probably panicking[comma] too[period] I should tell Dan[colon] Steady[exclamation point] President Obama says that these are times of change we can [air quotes]manage[close air quotes][period]

My friend Diane, who once illuminated for me the constant, twin themes of death and reprieve in my writing, just came for coffee. Before she left to pick up her son at school, she pointed out that sometimes I ostentatiously flag readers toward my humor, as though I don't trust them to find it themselves. Humiliated by her remark, and anxious as a kitten that's been squirted with water for getting up on counters but who still wants to steal the chopped chicken, I'm going to put my head down on my green, formica table and moan until I can think of a joke or two that no one has ever told before. Then maybe I'll call my brother Dan, whose breathing becomes perilously labored when he walks up even a slight hill but who is still, I can joyfully report, living a full life and looking forward to retiring to Nicaragua. If he doesn't answer, I'll worry about him. In a frenzy of despair about why, why, oh why is he not answering, I will clasp my hand to my heart and collapse, my blood-pumping organ fluttering erratically, then haltingly, and then not beating at all. A minute or two later, Dan will dutifully call me; the echoing, unanswered ring of the phone will symbolize the futility of human

connection. Enter my friend Diane, who will have come back into my kitchen to retrieve the God knows what that she had left behind. I will already be dead. As she weeps uncontrollably, my body will decay into ash, though she won't notice the change at first. She will, though, when the ash starts to move—nay, to whirl and swirl. She will gasp in disbelief when she sees that, miraculously, I have grown enormous wings powered by muscles rippling appealingly across my otherwise still delicate chest. My wings will push so much air as I flex them that winds will explode the double-paned windows around us. Then, with a light flexing and stretching of my legs, I will leave the tiled kitchen floor. "See you later, sucker!" I'll shriek to Diane as my wings carry me out the door, away from the green, formica table and unwashed coffee cups, out of reach of the call of the crock pot and bread machine and unfinished manuscripts, away from Diane, who always keeps herself looking good by visiting the gym and using gel in her hair, and then away even from the gassy death throes of the publishing industry, from sunny afternoons in California and beautiful mornings in Manhattan, from thoughts of Nicaragua, and from all the rest of you plebes who couldn't find a joke in my prose if it shined an arc light at you and bit you on the knee. Period. Exclamation point.

