



The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End

By Katie Roiphe

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From one of our most perceptive and provocative voices comes a deeply researched account of the last days of Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, John Updike, Dylan Thomas, Maurice Sendak, and James Salter—an arresting and wholly original meditation on mortality.

In *The Violet Hour*, Katie Roiphe takes an unexpected and liberating approach to the most unavoidable of subjects. She investigates the last days of six great thinkers, writers, and artists as they come to terms with the reality of approaching death, or what T. S. Eliot called “the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea.”

Roiphe draws on her own extraordinary research and access to the family, friends, and caretakers of her subjects. Here is Susan Sontag, the consummate public intellectual, who finds her commitment to rational thinking tested during her third bout with cancer. Roiphe takes us to the hospital room where, after receiving the worst possible diagnosis, seventy-six-year-old John Updike begins writing a poem. She vividly re-creates the fortnight of almost suicidal excess that culminated in Dylan Thomas’s fatal collapse at the Chelsea Hotel. She gives us a bracing portrait of Sigmund Freud fleeing Nazi-occupied Vienna only to continue in his London exile the compulsive cigar smoking that he knows will hasten his decline. And she shows us how Maurice Sendak’s beloved books for children are infused with his lifelong obsession with death, if you know where to look.

The Violet Hour is a book filled with intimate and surprising revelations. In the final acts of each of these creative geniuses are examples of courage, passion, self-delusion, pointless suffering, and superb devotion. There are also moments of sublime insight and understanding where the mind creates its own comfort. As the author writes, “If it’s nearly impossible to capture the approach of death in words, who would have the most hope of doing it?” By bringing these great writers’ final days to urgent, unsentimental life, Katie Roiphe helps us to look boldly in the face of death and be less afraid.

Praise for *The Violet Hour*

“A beautiful book . . . The intensity of these passages—the depth of research, the acute sensitivity for declarative moments—is deeply beguiling.”—*The New York*

Times Book Review

“Profound, poetic and—yes—comforting.”—***People***

“Unconventional, engaging . . . [*The Violet Hour*] is at once scholarly, literary, juicy—and unabashedly personal.”—***Los Angeles Times***

“Enveloping . . . I read it in bed, at the kitchen table, while walking down the street. . . . ‘What normal person wants to blunder into this hushed and sacred space?’ she asks. But the answer is all of us, and Ms. Roiphe does it with grace.”—**Jennifer Senior, *The New York Times***

“A beautiful and provocative meditation on mortality.”—***Minneapolis Star Tribune***

“A tender yet penetrating look at the final days . . . Roiphe has always seemed to me a writer to envy. No matter what the occasion, she can be counted on to marry ferocity and erudition in ways that nearly always make her interesting.”—***The Wall Street Journal***

“Here is a critic in supreme control of her gifts, whose gift to us is the observant vigor that refuses to flinch before the Reaper. . . . She knows that true criticism does not bother with the mollification of delicate sensibilities, only with the intellect as it roils and rollicks through language.”—**William Gibaldi, *The New Republic***

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Editorial Review

Review

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“The critic who parses the artist parsing death must be every inch as intrepid as the artist himself. In *The Violet Hour*, Katie Roiphe delivers a . . . necessary report from ‘the deepening shades,’ as Yeats has it, rife with her hospitable authority and critical rectitude. . . . Here is a critic in supreme control of her gifts, whose gift to us is the observant vigor that refuses to flinch before the Reaper. . . . She knows that true criticism does not bother with the mollification of delicate sensibilities, only with the intellect as it roils and rollicks through language.”—**William Girdi, *The New Republic***

“Roiphe’s meticulously researched *The Violet Hour* provides a moving glimpse into the final days of Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, and other great thinkers.”—*Martha Stewart Living*

“Roiphe’s book, which is both a feat of reporting and an act of invention, is a literary embrace.”—*More*

“A revelation . . . This is the best book Roiphe has written. She shows that our interest in dying is not just an interest in endings, or in final things, or in posterity. Instead, it has to do with how we get along, how families and friendship work, in short, how we live.”—*The Paris Review*

“Her writing is as incisive and sharp as it is ruminative, so with *The Violet Hour* she’s managed to make me almost giddily excited to read about death.”—*Literary Hub*

“Beautiful and haunting . . . Never overly sentimental, this is a poignant and elegant inquiry into mortality.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Roiphe’s book is touching and luminous, profound and somehow reassuring. Recommend it to anyone who is grieving or has experienced a death, which ultimately means all of us.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Mesmerizing storytelling . . . Roiphe’s riveting profiles reveal a simple truth: each person faces death in a unique way.”—***Publishers Weekly***

“By combining the writer’s final moments of life with what they left on the page, Roiphe ultimately offers us something beyond the work: a glimpse of death that is startling and new, intimate and uncomfortable, and deeply, deeply human.”—***BookPage***

“What Roiphe discovers by closely observing and contemplating each of her subjects in their darkest hours—especially their courage and great flourishes of creativity when at their most vulnerable—surprises her, and the insights she shares are bound to affirm in readers the value and meaning of life.”—***Shelf Awareness***

“In this elegant and beautifully written set of elegies, Katie Roiphe looks death squarely in the face, describing how people evanesce, how others lose them, how they lose themselves, how writing is a means to negotiate for immortality. This courageous, generous, intimate book is suffused with affection, and therefore provides comfort even when its topic is the loneliness that inheres in finality.”—**Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree***

“Katie Roiphe’s *The Violet Hour* is ambitious and tender. Her subject is urgent and so is her prose—pressurized, curious, vibrating. Death in these pages is also an account of how gravity takes up residence in pragmatics: edits from a hospital bed, wanting a certain kind of pie, what to do with the dog. The book is not simply about facing death—imagining it, fearing it, fighting it, craving it—but a sensitive exploration of caregiving: the labor it demands, psychic and otherwise, and the deep intimacy it permits.”—**Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams***

About the Author

Katie Roiphe is the author of several books, including *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism*; *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Marriages*; *In Praise of Messy Lives: Essays*; and a novel, *Still She Haunts Me*. Her essays and articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Harper’s*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Slate*, and *Tin House*. She has a Ph.D. in literature from Princeton University and is the director of the Cultural Reporting and Criticism program at New York University. She lives in Brooklyn.

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Chapter 1

Susan Sontag

December 2004

If there is anyone on earth who could decide not to die it would be Susan Sontag; her will is that ferocious, that unbending, that unwilling to accept the average fates or outcomes the rest of us are bound by. She is not someone to be pushed around or unduly influenced by the idea that everyone has to do something or go through something, because she is and always has been someone who rises above. Nonetheless, right before Christmas, she is lying in a bed in Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, on the Upper East Side of

Manhattan, doing something that very much appears to those around her to be dying.

One night she and her friend Sharon DeLano stay up late listening to Beethoven's late string quartets in her hospital room. Sontag is very doped up. She is in a good enough mood to tell Sharon one of her favorite jokes. "Where does the general keep his armies?" Sharon answers, "I don't know." "In his sleeves," Sontag says, smiling.

The next day she is much more sober. When Sharon arrives, Susan is reading the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's juvenilia and they watch two movies together. Sharon has to press pause frequently, because Susan is talking through the whole movie, adding commentary and glosses.

Susan has known Sharon DeLano for a long time. They met in the mid-seventies when Sharon was working as an editor at The New York Review of Books. When Susan, who was recovering from her first cancer, doesn't want to be alone, she calls Sharon, who comes up and keeps her company at her Riverside Drive apartment.

Sharon has been an editor at Vanity Fair, Random House, and The New Yorker, where she edits Susan's work. On the surface, Sharon can seem tough, but to her friends she is warm and funny and ferociously loyal.

Sontag's third cancer comes into focus when Sookhee Chinkhan, her housekeeper, who's been with her for over a decade, sees bruises on her back when she is drawing her bath. Sookhee works for Susan five days a week, cleaning, cooking; there is a running chatter between them that other people are bewildered by.

The diagnosis of myelodysplastic syndrome, which leads to a particularly virulent strain of blood cancer, comes in March 2004. Sontag's son, David Rieff, a journalist in his early fifties, accompanies her to the doctor for a follow-up visit after the initial tests.

David is tall and elegant. He is handsome in the way of a Roman coin. He has the slight air of being crown prince to a country that has suddenly and inexplicably gone democratic.

The doctor lays out the grimmest possible scenario: There is absolutely no chance of remission or cure. He suggests that Sontag do nothing and take the remaining six months or so left to live her life.

In the weeks after Susan is diagnosed, Sookhee notices that sometimes she says, "Wow wow," and closes her eyes. Susan tells her it's the pain.

Inevitably, this latest illness brings back Sontag's first, dire cancer diagnosis in 1975. She was in her early forties when she discovered that she had stage 4 breast cancer. None of the doctors she initially consulted thought she had any hope at all, but she sought out aggressive treatments and she survived. From that point onward, the transcendence of ordinary illness and ordinary endings became incorporated and entangled with who she was—the person who seeks treatment, who solves her disease like a math problem, like a logical puzzle of the highest order. "I am gleaming with survivorship," she wrote in the eighties. The brush with death was incorporated into her dark glamour, her writer's pose. In an essay on photography, she wrote about "the sex appeal of death," and this was a sex appeal that she took on, the danger and thrill of coming near to it, of breathing it in, and turning back.

The extremity of her breast cancer, once she recovered, fed into her long-standing idea of herself as exceptional. Another way to look at this is that her long-standing idea of herself as exceptional fed into the way she handled her cancer. Sharon DeLano says, "Because she was so fierce, because she was

confrontational in terms of authority, her instinct was to confront it. She immediately decided that the doctors were wrong. This was a period when the idea of a second opinion was not a very common one. .??. and she was so fierce that she went out and got one, and she survived. I think it was a vindication of who she was and how she thought. Because she didn't do the conventional thing, and she thought for herself and she lived. And it sort of reinforced all the things she was and the kind of thinker that she was. What that meant was that the next time she got sick and the next time, she thought she could do the same thing." Indeed, when she was diagnosed with uterine cancer in 1998, she avidly pursued arduous and aggressive treatments, chemotherapy, surgery, and she survived.

In her notebooks you can see the work of self-mythologizing all along, the labor of it, the relentless taking of raw life materials and shaping them into an idea of herself as exceptional. Everyone does this, of course, but Sontag does it with a million times more commitment, more intensity, and more success than other people. Her myth is all-encompassing, seductive. One of her friends comments that she has "star quality," and he is referring not to her beauty but to her drive for attention, her self-conscious deployment of myth. She berates herself in her journals: "Don't smile so much." "Weakness is a contagion. Strong people rightly shun the weak." It is her will to become that is most spectacular, her constant working on herself, tinkering with it as if it were an essay. She writes at twenty-four, "In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself."

Her drive for transformation was always powerful. She went to Berkeley at sixteen, transferring after a semester to the more academically rigorous University of Chicago. There she met a much older professor, Philip Rieff, and after ten days decided to marry him. She got a master's degree in philosophy at Harvard, and then she left Rieff and their four-year-old son, David, for a couple of years to go and study at Oxford and the Sorbonne, when that was what she felt she needed to do.

From girlhood, Sontag's private mythology was predicated on a contempt for the ordinary and a distance from it. She once mocked her good friend Stephen Koch for having a savings account and health insurance, because that was what ordinary, middle-class people had. Intellectuals and artists didn't have savings accounts or health insurance.

In early interviews after her recovery from breast cancer, she seemed intoxicated by her proximity to death. She said the following in an almost giddy interview in The New York Times in 1978: "It has added a fierce intensity to my life, and that's been pleasurable.???It's fantastic knowing you're going to die; it really makes having priorities and trying to follow them very real to you. That has somewhat receded now; more than two years have gone by, and I don't feel the same sort of urgency. In a way I'm sorry; I would like to keep some of that feeling of crisis. .??. I think it's good to be in contact with life and death. Many people spend their lives defending themselves against the notion that life is melodrama. I think it's good not to damp down these conflicts.???. You get terrific energy from facing them in an active and conscious way. For me, writing is a way of paying as much attention as possible."

While she was being treated for her breast cancer, she did not stop working or thinking, or struggling to work and think. In the midst of chemotherapy, she was taking notes for her elegant and influential polemic *Illness as Metaphor*. In it she argues against the various fantasies that surround disease. Instead of poetry and emotionally charged beliefs, she argues, patients need clarity, rational thought, and medical information, to prepare themselves for the hard work of the cure. In her hospital room, she wrote in her journal, "I have become afraid of my own imagination," and it was this fear she so brilliantly investigated and rejected in *Illness as Metaphor*. She writes that the imagination, the romantic overlay we give disease, is itself violent, destructive.

After the diagnosis of myelodysplastic syndrome, Sookhee sometimes sleeps over in the living room, because Susan does not want to be alone. One night she wakes up to Susan screaming. She is panicked. Sookhee has never seen her like this before. Sookhee sits on the bed and holds her and begins to pray, because that is all that she can think to do. "Please Lord, give Susan peace."

In "The Way We Live Now," her excellent short story about illness, about what it is like to be sick, Sontag writes: "Dying is an amazing high he said to Quentin. Sometimes I feel so fucking well, so powerful, it's as if I could jump out of my skin. Am I going crazy, or what? Is it all this attention and coddling I'm getting from everybody, like a child's dream of being loved? Is it the drugs? Or what? I know it sounds crazy but sometimes I think it is a fantastic experience." She writes this in 1986 as someone who knows what dying feels like. She writes this as someone who was dying and then turned back.

That spring of 2004, after her diagnosis with leukemia, she turns her apartment into a center for medical research. Everyone is doing Internet searches, and friends are calling with suggestions and doctors' names and obscure studies. Susan's young assistant, Anne Jump, helps her find as much information about the illness as she can. They have gone into crisis mode, and everything is about finding a cure. Susan becomes a student of her disease; she studies, underlining in the leukemia pamphlet. Once, years earlier, she jotted down in her notebooks an Auden quote: "I must have knowledge and a great deal of it before I feel anything."

The night before her first exploratory surgery for breast cancer in 1975, she sat in her hospital room at Sloan Kettering with a close friend. Susan was very much herself, which is to say that she had snapped at the intake nurse who called her "Sue" and brought another well-meaning friend who had tried to talk in the platitudes of adversity almost to tears. And yet all of this snappishness was energy, high spirits of a kind, the imposition of herself on the world.

The sun was going down and she suddenly decided she wanted to write the introduction to Peter Hujar's book of photographs, *Portraits in Life and Death*, which she had agreed to do a long time before but had procrastinated. The portraits of prominent downtown figures included one staggeringly beautiful one of her, lying on a bed, staring upward, in a gray cable sweater; there were also the remarkable photographs of human remains from the catacombs in Palermo from the early sixties.

Hujar had brought the photographs of the catacombs over to Sontag's house on Washington Place after he took them. There was some discussion of coming after Sontag's eleven-year-old son, David, was asleep, so that the photographs wouldn't alarm him and give him nightmares. There were skeletons of children draped in ruffles, skulls with bits of ribbon, skulls with wreaths of flowers; it is not the bones but the remnants of the lives, these little bits of cloth and ribbon, that are terrifying, evocative, that reach out and draw the viewer into the idea that everyone they love will die too.

That evening in the hospital in 1975, her friend found something wide and flat for her to write on, and she scribbled away. The mood of the essay is dreamier than usual. In her hospital bed, she took a romantic, intimate view of death with its "sweet poetry and its panic." Her scrawled sentences have a mesmerized quality too. She was staring at something in the middle distance that we cannot normally see. "We no longer study the art of dying, a regular discipline and hygiene in older cultures," she wrote, "but all eyes, at rest, contain that knowledge."

There was peace in the room as she was writing. To be finishing, to be working: This was important to her. The friend who sat with her leafed through a magazine as the orange dusk flooded the room. The essay, one of her more graceful, unlabored pieces of writing, took her less than an hour.

Her friend remembers her quoting Samuel Johnson with amusement: “Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” Peals of laughter after saying it.

If Sontag was fierce in her determination to fight in that first experience with cancer, her companion of the time, Nicole Stéphane, was equally fierce. Nicole tracked down Dr. Lucien Israel, who pioneered Sontag’s experimental treatment, in Paris. He wrote to Sontag, “I do not think your case is hopeless,” and that very faint expression of optimism was enough to spur her on. After the operation for her breast cancer, a radical mastectomy called a Halsted, someone sent flowers to Susan’s apartment on Riverside Drive. Nicole threw them off the terrace in rage. Flowers were for death.

Later, in Sontag’s private mythology, this fierceness is processed as a by-product of her intellect and determination: her refusal to accept her diagnosis or her mortality, her ability to shake off the metaphors of her illness and act. But now, in 2004, with this latest, dire diagnosis, she is laboring to maintain her belief in this specialness; she is now having to work to prop it up. She says to several people, including David, “I don’t feel special this time,” or “I don’t feel lucky this time.” She is working to fight off the dread, to find her way back to the luck, the specialness, again.

In the meantime, she doesn’t want to be alone. She doesn’t like the lights off. She has people coming through all the time, people in attendance. These people offer reassurance that she is who she was. One gets the sense that it is only in the dark, and alone, that she is dying.

Her long relationship with Annie Leibovitz, whom Sharon had introduced her to, is by now distant and troubled, but Annie is still in her life. Even at the high point of their relationship, they don’t like the label “couple” and prefer “friends” or “lovers.” Annie has taken photographs of Susan in hotels, in beds, in baths, that are playful, soft, open, evoking a happier time—unlike the usual daunting photographs of Sontag. They keep separate apartments that overlook each other, in the Chelsea building London Terrace.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jennifer Vickery:

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