

A LIFE OF COURAGE: COLLEEN CRAWFORD
by Clarence A. Crawford

I recently witnessed the end of a brief, obscure, courageous life. This life should not pass without comment.

My recollections of sister Colleen (October 1, 1959-February 6, 2006, aged forty-six) are an accumulation of disconnected episodes. I left our home in the East in 1970, when Colleen was aged ten. Most of her life was lived beyond my vision. She was only aged five in 1964, when I started college. From that time forward I spent less and less time at home, and when I moved to Alaska my ties to the East became increasingly tenuous. But in 1988 I decided to re-visit western Pennsylvania, and seeing Colleen was part of my agenda. So my most vivid recollections are of her as an adult; the haziest are shadowy memories from her childhood and my youth; the rest are part of family lore, narrated to me by the custodian of that lore, my mother.

By 1988 Colleen had been disabled by a variety of diseases and afflictions for twenty-four years. She was a cantankerous, mobile invalid, active enough to walk and socialize but unable to hold down a job, let alone develop a career. By then she had managed to alienate or severely frustrate everyone in our family but me, and perhaps sister Betty. I found that she and I were on good terms. Distance does wonderful things for some relationships. (Betty lived in Tennessee.)

Colleen lived for most of her adult life in housing designed for the aged and mildly disabled, an apartment building, really, with a quiet population and a friendly staff. In this she was very fortunate: she did not join the street people and the homeless that resulted from the Reagan Revolution. She instead was upheld by Social Security. This building was near medical care and other social services, and some public transportation.

Colleen did not like the location, however. New Kensington is one of the industrial towns that are strung along the three rivers of Pittsburgh, and it was not doing well after the disappearance of the steel industry. When I visited her, I saw the great advantages of her situation; she saw the drug dealers, prostitutes, and crime.

Over the years I developed a routine for visiting Colleen. I would arrange by telephone to be at the curb at her building in my rental car in the morning. Regardless of when I arrived, she was there, ready for the day: a cap I had given her, with my business logo, askew on her head, in immaculate condition, because she only wore it on these occasions; an eccentric outfit (more later); “jewelry” on every finger and both wrists; an assortment of keys and tokens and oddments somehow attached to a chain. The whole thing must have weighed ten pounds and served no purpose, since the only key she needed was her room key. A huge purse which, like the key chain, served no discernible purpose but contained a lot of something. And shopping bags, at least two, contents mysterious. She was ready for action.

After 1990, she met me with a big white smile. The intense whiteness of the smile was caused by her false teeth, which my dentist had consented to construct for her on short notice when she visited Anchorage with my mother in that year. (Colleen had all of her teeth extracted in the mid-80s. Just one more health problem to deal with.) Mom and I split the cost. The teeth were as immaculate as the cap. More later.

I was her brother from Alaska. If any workers or friends were in the area, Colleen was sure to point this out, and announce that I “was a wilderness guide. I keep watching the Discovery Channel in case you’re on. I watch all the Alaskan shows.” Colleen apparently thought that my potential television fame was a likelihood rather than a near-impossibility. I hate television and would never consent to being filmed for it. (One dismaying thing I learned from guiding is that even the most intelligent, sophisticated people insist on confusing television with reality; in fact, television trumps reality; they compare what they are actually experiencing with television to establish its veracity!)

What to do for the day? My usual plan was to go to breakfast somewhere, then for a drive in the countryside, and then a walk. She loved to walk—so do I—and forward motion is a good cover for thin conversation. Besides, a walk in the woods produces its own conversational topics: a bird sighting, a set of deer prints, clouds, water, leaves. Colleen connected to the natural world and it was an excellent antidote to the necessarily unnatural existence she was forced to live. She had superior eyesight and visual alertness—and was proud of it—and was invariably the first to spot some fleeting and obscure object, a bit of a deer or the tiniest bird.

I remember two episodes that featured Colleen’s false teeth, mentioned above. The first occurred at a dinner. Our mother and I took her to a

restaurant of her choice. She chose a franchise steak house, though she was supposed to eat soft foods because of her severe Crone's Disease (which eventually killed her.) We ordered. She of course selected steak, the exact wrong choice. We were served. And immediately upon confronting her slab of meat, the teeth came out. She deposited them in the depths of her voluminous handbag, and proceeded to attack her meal, gumming the meat until she could choke it down. She explained this bizarre inversion by claiming that her gums were too tender to tolerate the teeth, though I am certain that they were the best teeth to be made by dental science; and her gums were tough enough to massage, if not masticate, the steak. This perversity was something I could view with a mixture of dismay and amusement, though it could be maddening to those who spent more time in her company than I did, and who had to pay the price of her bad decisions, such as my mother.

The second episode was heartbreaking rather than frustrating. I collected Colleen for breakfast, after which we planned to tour Beechwood Farms, an Audubon bird sanctuary near New Kensington. We ate, she of course removing her teeth to do so; I didn't notice where the teeth disappeared to. When we were about to get in the car, she panicked: she couldn't locate her teeth! We returned to our booth, and she crawled under the table to look under it and under the benches; she then examined the general area minutely. She was distraught, panic on her face. Finally, she left word at the counter: if anyone finds my teeth, please call me; here is my number. (How can one lose one's teeth while eating, one may well ask; and the waitress probably did ask that of herself.) Back to the parking lot; and it broke my heart when she crawled on the asphalt to peer under the cars.

Why was she distraught? Why not throw the teeth away? After all, she didn't use the teeth when she ate; I doubt that she wore them at all except when I visited. And that is the point. I had had them made for her, and I was visiting, and she had "fucked up again," she said as we drove to the bird sanctuary, in a life full of fuck-ups. Her day was ruined; she was to blame...again. Behind her emotional agony I saw a life that was filled with failure, pain, and regret. For this hour or so she couldn't cover it over with clownishness.

And lo, as we embarked on our tour of the sanctuary—from her point of view, a waste of time, she had already managed to ruin the day, and my visit as well, and I had come all the way from Alaska to see her—she found her teeth, buried in the depths of her bag, where she desperately searched one last time.

Colleen was a great walker, though she lacked good shoes, or chose not to wear them. (When my wife and I learned that she loved to walk, we ordered a pair of walkers for her. She claimed to love them, but I never saw them.) Her routes took her through the bombed-out city, often along roads that took her through run-down townlets strung along the Allegheny River. But I think her favorite route was along a creek that served as a *de facto* greenbelt. It was overgrown with brush and no established trail followed it. I think she just poked along, often walking in the water, she said. By her accounts she might walk ten or fifteen miles in a day, alone, perhaps to a distant restaurant, where she would visit with the staff—“everyone knows me around here,” meaning within a ten mile radius of New Kensington—and then back. She was heedless about her safety, though she assured me that the creeps and drug dealers were everywhere.

She was involved with certain kinds of rehabilitation from time to time. Some of this involved group outings by bus to one activity or another, a county fair perhaps or a visit to a state park. I think she knew that these opportunities were a good thing; she was willing to participate, and she enjoyed them; but I think she was resentful too; a woman—though she never seemed to be a woman to me, always a girl—approaching middle age still going on field trips. Disabled. A dependent.

I met her for breakfast one Sunday. I felt happy and sad to see her. She felt very happy to see me, which made me feel sad. After eating at Eat 'n Park she was scheduled for an outing. The bus was to collect her in the parking lot of a deserted “shopping center,” empty parking lot, cracked cement, blank storefronts. She stood alone, her immense bag on her arm, ball cap askew, smiling and smiling much too much, her teeth very white. She waved and waved as I circled around the block. I could see her across the broken cement, alone, a strange figure. I was scheduled to return to Alaska, a good job, a family, a future; she faced a continuation of her bleak existence, fighting back desperation, knowing she had no future, the disease always in her gut. But she faced it. She did it. She did what she could.

At one period of my life, after 1988, I regularly visited certain hunting grounds in western Pennsylvania, and so I often took Colleen for long walks in these forests. I read in my journals that at times she struggled to enjoy herself. She did her best, for my sake, I think, but at times she was deeply sad, simply unable to enjoy life. Sometimes we “cruised,” as she said, the country roads in my rental, visiting areas from our youths, triggering memories that for me went back thirty-five years or more. Her memory was

good. I heard a lot of “Do you remember the time...” and “That scared the piss out of me...” and “I’ll never forget when he...” I think she was happiest when she went into the past. Her time at home after my parents took her in was no doubt the best period of her life. (My parents took her in as a foster child, at eighteen months. She had been badly abused. They eventually adopted her.) She remembered our father with particular fondness. He was not a demonstrative man, but Colleen sensed deep currents in him and remembered him with considerable empathy and warmth, and perhaps some guilt because of her many misdeeds.

The person who knew Colleen best is the person who shared her amniotic fluid for nine months: fraternal twin Cathy. True, their adult lives were very different, Cathy a success, Colleen struggling to keep afloat. In answer to my question, Were they estranged? Cathy wrote: “Not at all. I usually called her every week; sometimes getting her and sometimes not! If I did not hear back, I would always begin to worry and check with Mom to see if she had heard anything. One thing I remember that always made me smile—if she was calling me or returning one of my calls and I was not home, she would leave a message and say, ‘Hi Cath, this is your sister, Colleen!’ I always thought it was funny that she would say ‘your sister.’ Who else would it be?

“I tried to get Colleen to visit with us more, always volunteering to pick her up to stay with us for a few days. I always felt she had her own life and really wasn’t interested in interrupting her schedule. We sent birthday greetings and Christmas presents. She did come once before some tests at Cleveland Clinic and rumor has it that I drove her nuts because I took her drinking glass before she was done with it for the day. I, of course, don’t remember the incident; but hopefully I was trying to make her feel like a guest, not being anal about neatness.

“As kids, I remember always relying on Colleen—she was the strong willed, brave, outspoken one. I, being extremely shy, needed someone like her to help me cope with circumstances and difficult people. I’ll never forget how at summer readiness (before the days of kindergarten), the school system, much to my dismay, put us in separate classrooms. Colleen had the nice teacher—I did not. I got spanked on the very first day because a boy let me in front of him in the drinking fountain line and I was accused of passing in line. The teacher promptly put me over her knee and spanked me. Colleen and I met at recess outside and I cried on her shoulder—she gave me a little cardboard box that had a shiny gold star on it that she made in her class. (I would love to still own that.) She was not afraid of the cicadas—she would bury them by the hundreds in our sandbox, she was not afraid of

climbing trees, she was not afraid of the big sled riding hills, she was not afraid to stand up to people, she was not afraid to walk down the l-o-n-g road from the bus. I always hated when she wasn't there, even when we were in high school, and I had to walk it by myself.

“I also remember, later with some guilt, about being somewhat jealous of the attention she got when she was sick. I was just the sister at home, not really knowing what was going on. She would receive stuffed toys from people—a beautiful furry white cat and a stuffed bird that she named after one of her doctors—Dr. Gaffney. People would find out we were twins and ask “Why is she so much smaller than you are?” It is very difficult being a twin—always being compared. (Difficult for both of us! Because, not only did others compare, but we did as well.) My guess is, due to human nature, we were both always wondering why we couldn't be somewhat like each other. There are some of her qualities that I definitely would have liked to have. I wish I could have told her that.

“Colleen also had a beautiful alto singing voice. She had a solo at Christmas one year singing, ‘While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night.’ I always loved to sing and was in the children's choir too and was so envious that she could get up and sing by herself in front of all those people.

“In high school, we dated two guys from Avonmore, that were friends. She and her boy friend arranged the meeting for his friend and me. It didn't last long for the fix up, but it was fun having that sister connection.

“Colleen confided in me several times while we were adults with some very difficult situations that took place. I don't think I really helped her other than listening. I wish I had been more proactive with at least two of the incidents. I really did care about Colleen and miss her very much.”

Thank you, Cathy.

I am reminded of the important lesson, that the person I know is not the person someone else knows.

Once, when I collected Colleen at her building, she varied the routine, to my dismay.

My instructions, delivered by phone, were to get her at the apartment rather than at the curb. I was travelling with a friend, who waited at the car, and I promised to extract Colleen as expeditiously as possible, for she tended to linger. We three were to go to breakfast.

She answered my knock with a lilt in her voice, and I knew something was up. She wasn't visible and called out from her bedroom, suppressing her laughter. And lo, she was as pleased as she could possibly be, for she was wearing a cat costume, and loved it; it was Halloween, and she was a

devout observer of any excuse for a holiday, though it wasn't yet 7:00 AM. (Colleen once told me that she observed every event. If today was Italian-American day, she celebrated; if it was Polish-American day, she celebrated; for life is short and painful, as she well knew, and reasons for celebration rare.)

So we went for breakfast at Eat 'n Park, two middle-aged men in canvas pants, flannel shirts and ball caps; and one girl-woman, overweight from Prednisone and a large pharmacopoeia of drugs: sheer black leotards, tight black body suit around her thick midsection, black slippers, whiskered mask, tail. The regulars eyed us with loathing; but Colleen had a "ball," and I stayed remarkably steady, I must say, loyal to my eccentric sister regardless of the ambient hostility.

My friend and I faced a long drive that day, but I wanted to extend my time with Colleen, and we drove to a park out of town (in Lower Burrell) and walked in the woods and along a pond. She knew the park well, and each duck and goose individually, it seemed. She still wore her costume—she put some clothing over it—and now the activity was wholesome, though her cheerfulness waned, and she became increasingly subdued as time for separation approached. Curbside, with prolonged and painful farewells, her outrageous joy of the morning gone, she stood there forlorn, the anomaly that she was.

I once asked Colleen if she was a Steeler fan. Not so much. But she went to a game once, she said. (The stadium isn't far from New Kensington.) I don't think she cared much for the game, but she certainly enjoyed her costume, and horsing around. I don't know what her costume was, but I can imagine that it was something like the strangeness one sees on television, clowns mugging for the camera. I think she told me that she missed her ride after the game and had a terrible time getting back home. Another bad ending to a big day.

Colleen was a great gift-giver, at least to wife Di and me. After Di retired in 2000 she sometimes accompanied me to Pennsylvania, and hence also visited Colleen. And what was in those immense shopping bags that Colleen hauled around? Well, one mustn't ask, because they contained surprises, to be revealed later, after due suspense had developed.

Eventually she presented us with her gifts. Handkerchiefs, coffee cup, ("A Brother is Forever"), pine cones, trinkets, a singing fish, stuffed animals, blank notebooks, calendars, Christmas ornaments; and above all, moose, all kinds of moose, stuffed moose, images of moose, statues of

moose, for Colleen was the Moose Lady, a name well-earned, as we learn below. She gave so many gifts on each of our trips that we couldn't get them all in our luggage—I hope the hotel maid service had some way to salvage them. Too many gifts to keep, really; otherwise our house would look like her apartment, jammed tight with an incomprehensible assortment of junk, including the lava lamp, for atmosphere, and a menagerie of elephants, which served as good luck totems when she played bingo; she said when she went to the bingo hall she arranged them on the table around her and rubbed them when necessary. (I admit, I was tempted to keep the singing fish, but did not.) Colleen was a hoarder, either for psychological reasons, or because she was too lazy—or demoralized—to take care of her apartment.

In the end, what struck me about this gift-giving was that she must have shopped for us year-round, always keeping her eyes open for a bargain (she loved flea markets), and never passing up the chance at a moose. She hoarded this stuff against our annual or bi-annual visits. Now, that is affection in action, when the thought lasts the year around, and one gives regardless of one's wealth.

During Colleen's Alaska visit in 1990 she developed a reputation for keen vision, spotting many moose on our frequent walks. It was the spring of the year, May, and the moose were fairly easily seen—they are abundant in Anchorage in any case—and she was proud of her visual acuity. She saw moose, by golly, and she saw them first: trophies. I remember one episode with deep regret, however. Colleen and I hiked the Johnson Trail from Rainbow to McHugh Creek, and I got to the top of the first overlook ahead of her. I stepped out to take in the view, assuming that Colleen would see me, or I would see her; but it did not happen. She did not appear for some time, and I eventually concluded that she was now ahead of me on the trail rather than behind me, and that she was probably trying to overtake me, and wondering why I had ditched her. I followed her in great anxiety and eventually did overtake her, and she was frightened, because the Moose Lady had encountered a belligerent moose and had trouble getting by it. She was badly shaken, and worried about another moose encounter as we continued down the trail. Also, her inadequate shoes had rubbed deep raw spots into her heels. A hard day, for which I blamed myself.

Colleen's bad taste was astonishing. In addition to the cat costume, there was that cute outfit she wore on the airplane to Anchorage: yellow jumpsuit with no sleeves, and, as Di points out, no bra; cowboy boots; cowboy hat,

the kind that a child might wear, like a toy. Was it pink or white? She was all dressed up, and terribly excited. Ready to have a “ball.”

I experienced only a few of Colleen’s many health crises. The first I can barely conjure. She was a mere five-year-old, skinny, active. At the onset of severe abdominal pain, the docs diagnosed appendicitis, a reasonable judgment given the symptoms, and her appendix was quickly extracted. However, it was healthy. What could have caused her pain? It was only in hindsight, as brother Roy recently pointed out to me, that her specialist realized that this was her first attack of Crones. Colleen got a positive diagnosis of Crones Disease when she was in the 4th grade, and was tended by a Dr. Gaffney, of Pittsburgh’s Children’s Hospital, and a Dr. Seifert, a surgeon, who performed at least three surgeries on Colleen by the time she was aged 16. Then Dr. Beigi took over. He was a young doc when Colleen first came to him, and he was I suppose considering retirement when Colleen finally died—I never met the man—and I was told that he, or perhaps Dr. Gaffney, once said that Colleen’s first symptoms were the earliest he had ever observed. Their association was a long one. Based on Colleen’s remarks—she was a nasty, angry patient—they probably hated each other. She saw a psychologist also, and I think she hated him, too.

In February 1979 I got the phone call that everyone dreads, announcing illness or death. (This was the second such call I received, the first occurring in the fall of 1977, from brother Roy, to confirm my father’s expected death.)

Colleen was suffering from viral encephalitis and was scheduled for radical brain surgery. I was on a jet that evening, and by morning I was approaching Pittsburgh, the City of Champions, the pilot announced, Pittsburgh teams having won the Stanley Cup, the World Series, and the Super Bowl that year. In fact, the Super Bowl had been played yesterday and the victory parade was held as I visited Colleen at Presbyterian University Hospital. This observation may be pertinent later.

Colleen was somewhat awake. Head shaved, crescent scar on her skull. But even so I could tell that she was delighted that I had come “all the way from Alaska.” (That was a simpler time, when the world was bigger, and an impromptu plane reservation, even a long distance phone call, was an event. I had bought the ticket with a check, since I did not possess a credit card.) The docs had removed an infected part of her brain, a piece “the size of an orange.” The danger was grave and her recovery was remarkable, and in

later years I could observe no ill effects that were any different from her "normal" behavior and eccentricities.

In our family, neurosurgeons are heroic. One dedicated man had loyally tended my brother Paul for a month in 1966 as he lay dying in this same hospital. (Car "accident," nearly head-on; a gang of drunken kids in the other car; a highway holocaust that occurred before drinking-and-driving was recognized as the threat it is.) Neurosurgeons went to that most mysterious human place; they probed into a medical frontier; their cases always seemed hopeless, at best very difficult; they had to deal with bitter failure and were rewarded with only occasional success. I did not meet Colleen's surgeon, but her case was one of the successes, and I felt glad for him, whoever he was.

Colleen's emotions were mercurial. As a child, she lived in the moment, quick as a sprite; thin, athletic, a fast runner. More than anything, I remember her giggle. She loved to laugh, and I remember that laugh as a trill, when she was little, and a more contralto chuckle when she was older, her voice perhaps thickened by cigarette smoke. Her laugh started in her diaphragm and bubbled up. It seemed to escape her, and in my memory was very pleasing.

She was also quick to anger, quick to respond to frustration, quick to change. In this regard, she remembered vividly, and mentioned to me several times, that when she was a tyke, something ignited her anger and frustration. I don't think she remembered what it was that triggered it; what was important was the outcome. For she decided that the best response was to climb high into a tree, and stay there. And what she remembered, with great fondness, was Dad talking her down from the tree. I would give a lot to have a record of what he said, and how he said it.

I would also like to know what drove her up the tree.

The tree was one of several along our driveway (at the end of a long dirt road we called our "lane"; we were country people.) They were densely grown spruce trees and I don't know how anyone could climb in them, but Colleen was small, thin, and nimble. And she loved to climb trees. I suppose that escaping up the tree seemed sensible to her.

During several visits to the old property, Colleen was excited to see the outcome of a tree-planting campaign I engaged in one spring when a boy. The maples I transplanted were large and beautiful as only a maple can be. The hemlocks did not do as well, but several managed to thrive. These trees are a major intersection in Colleen's life and mine, and are a great satisfaction to me, though I don't expect to see them again.

My mother recently told me that, when a toddler, Colleen was afraid of men, and would not get into a bathtub. I also remember vividly that she was tormented by nightmares and would scream at night, horrible screams. I don't know the specific abuse she suffered as a tiny child, before she was 18 months of age, but it must have been horrific, and the effects must have lasted her entire life. Maybe that is one reason she loved Dad. Here was a man she could trust.

She was rebellious and guilt-ridden, angry and remorseful. She fought against the people that helped her the most, most particularly my mother; yet Colleen relied upon Mom and owed her life to her. I am aware of just a few of Colleen's many "fuck-ups," such as the time she ran the family car off the road into the forest, on a steep country road leading down from our property. The story was that a tire blew out. I don't know if that was true or not. She had just graduated from high school. Her timing was impeccable: always the worst.

Or perhaps, in her way, the best, and this has always puzzled me. I wrote above that her 1979 health crisis coincided with a Super Bowl that the Steelers won. It so happens that her death, likewise, coincided with another Steeler Super Bowl victory.

From my perch in Anchorage, I heard little about Colleen during the winter of 2007-2008. However, I had visited with Colleen in October 2007. We did our usual activities, this time walking on the Roaring Run Watershed rail-trail, near Apollo. We walked to the end, which at that time was at the vile mine site which added so much acid to the Kiskiminetas River, and generated enough waste to cover the entire mountaintop adjacent to my parents' property. Now, decades later, the waste had been used to generate electricity, and the acid mine discharge was being addressed; not by the mine owners, but with public and private funds and volunteer work. Colleen was her usual self, in some respects, spotting deer tracks and noticing birds, but she seemed subdued; no bubbly laugh, no chatter. We had a good visit, but it was different. Something had gone out of her life, perhaps.

During the winter she had yet another surgery, and the Cronos had pretty much destroyed her digestive tract. She died of heart failure while recovering from surgery. (Her heart was not healthy. She had a heart attack in 2004 also.)

Colleen had not alerted anyone about this procedure, not even loyal Mom (who had visited her from Tennessee just a few weeks earlier.) Mom couldn't reach Colleen and called Colleen's good friend Loretta, and learned that Colleen was in Shadyside Hospital. Brother Roy and Carrie came to

Pittsburgh from Colorado a few days before the Super Bowl (to watch it in the Apollo fire hall; old time's sake) and only then learned of Colleen's situation, and they then visited her. After the game, the next morning they received a call from my mother as they drove to the airport and learned of Colleen's decline. Roy and Carrie were at the hospital with Mom and Nancie Allen when Colleen died, about 4 PM on February 6, a Monday. She had no other visitors.

She called Roy "Clarence" before she died. This bothered Roy, I am sure; but it bothered me too, because Clarence wasn't there. Many times I thanked fate that I had visited in the fall.

This is my mother's recollection: "Colleen did not call anyone when she had her last surgery, but she thought that she had called me. Since I did not go up [from Tennessee] her friend Loretta asked her if she had called me and she said she did. I had not been able to get Colleen on the phone for some time and finally called Loretta and she told me that she was in the hospital and had surgery. I went up the next day. The day before she died, on February 5, the weather was getting bad so I left the hospital for Apollo about 4:00 or 4:30 PM. I had not thought she was doing well, but the surgeon thought she was improving. They did call her cardiologist in and he thought she was doing pretty well. She had been hallucinating and saw butterflies flying above her head before I left that last day. The nurse was with her then. At about 3:00 AM on February 6 Nancie [Allen, a close friend with whom Mom was staying] got a call and they were looking for me. Colleen had gone into cardiac arrest and they wanted me to go right into the hospital. Nancie and I left in short order and I drove. The roads were very bad and it was snowing hard, but we made it to the hospital, I think about 5 AM or earlier. Colleen was on a ventilator in the Cardiac Intensive Care unit. After I had visited with her a few minutes (she was in a coma), the nurse asked me if she had any siblings. I said she did and the nurse sat me down at the desk there at the telephone and told me to call all of them, right then. I did, and tried to get Roy at Crissman's [Carrie's family]. There was no answer and I left a message. Then I remembered that he had a cell phone and called that number. I knew they were leaving that morning but didn't think they would have started for the airport yet. Roy and Carrie were on their way to the airport and I told them what was going on. They went to the airport and renewed their car rental and came back to the hospital and they and Nancie stayed there with me until she died at around 4:00 PM that afternoon. I had asked earlier in the day if they could use any of her organs for transplant; I thought they might be able to use her eyes,

(she always had such sharp eyes) and an organ transplant person came up and spent quite a bit of time going over her records and told me they could not use anything because of her illness and all the medication she had taken.”

I cannot go so far as to claim that Colleen simply decided to end the struggle at this point. I do know that she went the final distance pretty much alone, probably with the support of her friend Loretta, and Roy and Carrie, and Mom and Nancie. But for the most part it was a solitary end, and I have to wonder, did she make the choice to go it alone, a final act of heroism? I think so.

The funeral service was a reunion, as it should be. I took particular note that Colleen’s social worker was present—I didn’t even know she had one in particular, and was moved by her loyalty. The Crissman family did yeoman work preparing—and cleaning up after—an excellent meal at the Presbyterian Church in Apollo.

Colleen had been cremated. The day after the memorial service we went to the cemetery for an informal gathering, and a lunch afterwards. Roy pointed out to me that at one grave, on a nearby hillside, someone had placed a sign: “Go Steelers.” In Pittsburgh, even the dead are Steelers fans.

As her final act, Colleen managed to upstage even the Super Bowl.

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