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‘What is a good life, well-lived, and who says so?’ So asks Mary Loudon, pondering the short life of her sister Catherine, dead at 47 from breast cancer.

When Catherine died, Mary, 13 years her junior, had not seen her sister for something like 12 years. Family relations were difficult because of Catherine’s schizophrenia, and although she had kept in touch, Mary had not dared to risk outright rejection by turning up on her doorstep. So when the devastating news came, she had to get to know her sister as best she could, by visiting her flat in Bristol and meeting the people she knew. She uncovered a network of admiring and admirable friends: a life very much worth living, which Catherine had not wanted to leave. She was shocked and angry at the ‘consolations’ many friends offered, which tended to imply that the mentally ill are better off dead, and mourning them is a waste of time.

Loudon raises many questions about the assumptions people often make about mental illness, but subjects her own emotions and thought processes to equally rigorous analysis. Relative Stranger reminds me in many ways of Helen Garner’s non-fiction: it’s intelligent, thoughtful, and deeply personal.