

A Persistent Error

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My-Hundred-Year-Old Window

I live on the second floor of an old building. One room, one window. Having only one window keeps me focused on the life I can see within its perimeter.

perimeter, The continuous line forming
the boundary of a closed geometrical figure.

Noah Webster 1926 Dictionary

My view is tempered by defects in the antique glass of my window. If I hold very still, the outside appears one way. If I slightly lift or lower my head, the images I see waver like reflections on ripples of water.

The hundred-year-old glass is my Walden Pond. Was the glass made with these trembling waves, or did they come with old age? Or is it my eyes? My seventy-two-year-old eyes deceiving me.

A Misleading Of The Mind

I have a picture of my father taken in 1949. The year he died. I study his face. My eyes tell me I'm looking at a man who would have chosen to live.

But that's not what Mama believed.

delusion, 1. A false impression or belief,
a misleading of the mind.

Mama said, "Your father would not have wanted to live a cripple."

I know this is what she believed. But I don't know what made her believe this.

delusion, 2. A persistent error of a deranged mind.

It had all been a voluntary, self-created delusion.

Jane Austen

All the years I was growing up in Hollywood Papa was making cheap movies he didn't like. Then, finally 1949, he was directing a movie he wanted to make. It was called NOT WANTED. Ida Lupino had put up the money. But on the third day of shooting, a blood clot burst in Papa's brain while he was right in the middle of directing a scene.

In The Hospital Room

On the bed his right hand moved. Just enough to write notes. He couldn't move his head to see what he was writing. He had me move the pieces of paper so that he could put down each letter one after the other. I didn't tell him that nobody could read his notes.

Out in the hall the doctors and nurses talked with Mama. I didn't know she was telling them not to operate.

delusion, 3. A perception which fails to give the true character of an object perceived.

Mama's Perceptive Powers

Mama stands in the doorway staring at her husband lying on the hospital bed. He cannot talk. But he can hear. And he can signal with his right hand. Mama doesn't talk to him. She just looks at him lying flat on his back. Most of him cannot move at all. She sees this with her eyes.

optics, An instrument for investigating the discriminative powers of the retina of the eye.

Mama uses her discriminative powers to reach the conclusion that Papa would not want to live as a cripple.

discriminate, 1. To distinguish with the mind. to perceive nice differences.

At the funeral, Mama tells me that the doctors had asked her to let them operate. They said they could save his life, but he would be a cripple.

discriminate, 2. To distinguish accurately, as, to discriminate between fact and fancy.

Mama said, "Your father would not have wanted to live a cripple."

A Sense Of Humor

I have a picture of Papa's great-uncle George riding on a donkey. He lived to be ninety. He was Uncle Hilton's father.

I have a picture of Uncle Hilton. Before he was a cripple. The caption in the photo album doesn't say why he's all dressed up, so jaunty, so debonair, standing on the wet sand with his shoes brightly polished. Maybe it's a joke. Papa said Hilton loved to kid around.

The next picture is Hilton with his arms around his two army buddies. The caption "Singing Trio" is a joke. You turn the picture over and it says, "We never sing."

Late one night, celebrating the end of World War I, Hilton and his two friends were on their way home from a party. All three were

very drunk. They decided to take a ride on a small, flat, hand-driven railway car.

Hilton was singing to the rhythm of his two friends pumping the handle up and down. They got the flatcar going very fast.

Hilton fell off onto the railway tracks. The iron wheels ran over him. He lived another fifty years. His back wouldn't bend. He couldn't walk. Aunt Grace was his nurse in the hospital. That's where they met.

Uncle Hilton and Aunt Grace were the only people I remember our family visiting. We went to their house on our Sunday drives.

They let me go into their bedroom and get the pastel crayons and paper they kept for me on the bottom shelf of their closet.

Their bed was higher than normal beds. It had a swinging bar over it. In the mornings Hilton must have hoisted himself up, to swing himself over, and get onto the rolling, slanting bed that Aunt Grace wheeled into the living room everyday.

I liked visiting their home. I would draw pictures with their pastels, and listen to Uncle Hilton and Papa talking and laughing. Papa used to say that being a cripple hadn't made Hilton lose his sense of humor.

Mama said, "Your father would not have wanted to live a cripple."

How did she know? Did she ask him? He could signal yes or no. Did she ask him?

The Show Must Go On

The hospital where Papa died was an old brown brick building in the middle of downtown Los Angeles.

Papa's room had only one bed. One window that looked out on an air shaft with a brown brick wall. If I forced open the window, and stuck my head out, I could see a square of sky five stories above. A square of cement four stories below.

I remember the hours and hours of sitting by his bed. Only his breathing going in and out. Most of the day it was just he and I alone in the hospital room.

Papa didn't know that he was through as the director of the movie. I didn't know this either until the first evening when I phoned his producer, Renson.

I stood at a pay phone in the hospital lobby. I said, "He's going to be all right. The doctors say —"

Renson interrupted me, shouting, "I have good news, too! We kept right on shooting!"

At first I didn't understand. How could they keep shooting with no director? Then I heard Renson saying that Ida Lupino had taken over the directing.

"She's a great little trouper! It's going to be just what your father wanted."

I wondered why Renson was shouting. Or maybe he wasn't. Maybe it was just that I'd been sitting so many hours in the silent room with Papa. Maybe that's why I had trouble talking on the phone.

I said, "It's Papa's movie. He's the director. You have to wait for him."

"My dear, it would cost thousands of dollars if we closed down production. The show must go on. If anyone understands this great

rule of show business, it's your father."

I heard Renson's voice going on and on as I was hanging up.

I didn't tell Papa they weren't waiting for him. Nobody else told him. Not many people in Hollywood even knew he was in the hospital. Renson explained to Mama that it wouldn't be good publicity for the movie. People in show business are very superstitious, he said. They might take it as a bad omen if it were known that Papa had been struck down right in the middle of the shooting.

A Closing Note

Papa lay with his eyes on the ceiling while his right hand moved just enough to write notes. He thought he was communicating with his producer about the movie. I couldn't tell him that his notes were going nowhere.

I'd pick them up and hold them so he could see me going toward the door with them. I'd stay away long enough so that he would believe the note had reached the office at the studio. I must have been just as out of touch with reality as he was.

At the moment Papa died he was writing a note to his producer. I was the only one with him. I had my eyes centered in on his fingers as if my concentration would help him keep writing.

That's when I heard the sound. I had never heard it before, but I knew right away what it was. I'd always thought the death rattle was something writers of melodramas dreamed up. But I heard Papa's death rattle. I heard the life come clattering up out of his body while he was still laboring to get the next word down on the paper. □