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Reflections for December

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THE MAN FROM DACHAU

His wife helps him hobble into the examination room, heavily bent over and frail where once a tall and healthy young boxer juked and jived. He breaks his shuffle and torques to look up at me, eyes as unpaled and piercingly blue as in his youth, nodding and grunting a little to communicate hello before his wife leads him lovingly to the chair. He sits there patient and reticent, both hands resting on his cane, while his wife, spry and witty in her elderly years, communicates for him what seem to be his ailments, evolving problems, and the logistics of the numerous medicines he consumes daily. He looks around the room briefly at times before looking down again, sometimes glancing over at his wife, and when his intermittent gaze falls on me to make eye contact, I suddenly feel intimidated for those brief moments. I find it uncanny how you can tell when you are in the presence of a leader, of a dynamic individual by some subtle manifestation of presence, even if it is buried under layers of medical illnesses and advancing age. He is aware, focusing on his wife and me attentively, taking things in, but at a slant.

Among his wife-mediated complaints is a fluctuation over a matter of hours in his ability to perform some of his activities of daily living, a shying away from bathing, and intermittent unannounced incontinence being his wife's most troublesome concern, selflessly because she is afraid it will shame him. He has never become aggressive despite his training as an amateur boxer, but fears spectral beings born from the television set with growing frequency. His gait is unsteady and falls are a growing concern. He responds dismally to low doses of his many medications, the side effects quickly becoming the ceiling of dosing before efficacy can be reached. He looks over into his wife's watering eyes as she speaks her concerns on his behalf and responds to some light internal thought, reaching over, patting her on the leg, smiling, "Katie, I love you."

Her name is not Katie, but she smiles back at him, unfazed by this tip-of-the-iceberg expression of his declining memory. He has forgotten long ago all the important elements of their life together, and once a habitual talker, he has dropped slowly into long periods of silence. His is a mixed dementia, likely but

nondefinitively a diffuse Lewy body dementia, a currently thickening dementia, and his wife, like so many others, is concerned with keeping him healthy and in her presence as long as possible. I can think of no better medicine available to give to her right now than more time with him. This is our first encounter. At last year's visit, another resident's note briefly acknowledges the obvious poor cognitive baseline, but not specifically, so I am not sure of the degree of domain-specific decline since that time. I start my examination. When I come to testing his cognition, I start teasing out the boundaries of memory, his capacity to remember short-term facts and recall his personal information as well as memories from the world at large, both in the short and lengthier intervals of time. He is silent to all questioning, but does not appear confused, and looks directly at me eye-to-eye and with his wife intermittently, the smirk of a leader's gentle assurance on his face.

I start to see flashes of recognition when I ask about historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Winston Churchill, Socrates. To Martin Luther King, I receive, "Strong man," JFK, "Shot in Dallas," and Jesus of Nazareth, after a long pause, "Gave us our bread, our daily bread, and forgave us our trespasses." We all smile at the obvious presence of himself in there somewhere. His wife rocks slightly, trying to contain her excitement at the flash of her husband coming through like a ray of light as the storm clouds start to break. She reaches over and strokes his hand, wanting to connect to him but conservatively so in my presence. I delve into his service history, into the yellowing pages of World War II and his time in Europe. I ask him who Hitler was, what's significant about the Jewish people. His demeanor changes palpably and he looks down. Sensing the change, I am waiting for a response as I write a note or two on my paper. When he looks up again, tears are running down his cheeks, his lack of facial expression belying the deep flowing ocean underneath.

"It was their eyes. Only their eyes that moved."

It is abrupt. Unexpected.

I feel goose bumps run up and down my arm in waves, then across my neck. I tilt my head unconsciously, and his wife is silent, the room suddenly set apart one thousand miles into deep space.

“Dachau.” (Long pause.) “I vomited.”

His wife looks at me and says softly and apologetically, “He liberated Dachau. He was in the forward front before being later turned back by the Russians.”

She is interrupted by a slow, aching, and suddenly open voice, “When we walked into Dachau, they were too weak to move. They were skeletons ... Skeletons. All gray. Gray ... Dusted. Dachau. They were free and only their eyes were free to move ... all following us along ... All the bodies hanging and lying on the ground.” He is suddenly urgent after more pause and memory obviously rolling past his mind’s eye, and when he looks at me with furrowed brow, I shift in my seat, uncomfortable under the weight. “All skeletons, dead, living gray skeletons. But their eyes. Their eyes followed us. Only their eyes.”

The room remains silent.

After an eternally long and somewhat shocked pause, his brows ever-so-slowly soften and he sinks back into his former state, less acutely aware of himself, layers of dementia piling back in and over the memory as I leave it alone and stop digging it out. His wife rubs his shoulder, consciously holding back her own emotions. He looks over and up at her, “I love you, Katie.”

I am surprised and ashamed by my encounter with this man with his Cimmerian blessing ... burying his Cimmerian curse. It lingers with me. It is why I entered medicine, and yet, makes me feel guilty, as though I were clergy who brought up an explicit confession over dinner with a friend. Is it always better to remember, or sometimes to forget?

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