

The Sound of Laughter

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by Susan Ferguson



Ever since Tuesday's tragedy it has seemed that we Americans let out a collective gasp of horror and are still holding our breaths in grim anticipation of our next move.

This weekend I finally switched off the television and sought reassurance outside that life was still beating with its old familiar rhythms. I walked through parks and shopping malls, finding families on picnics, wedding receptions being set up and couples chatting at sidewalk cafes. But a solemn hush pervaded each scene, lending an air of unreality as though we were all stand-ins appearing at the correct locations on each set, but not acting with the confidence or bravado of real characters.

We are all still reeling, free falling in a space somewhere between our old security and a collective future that remains at large, hidden and hard to grasp.

And what I crave the most—the sound of laughter—is nowhere to be found.

Monday afternoon I volunteer at the Rehab hospital downtown, where I have the chance to meet patients and be privy to their stories. On this day I am about to leave when I decide to stop in to meet a new name on my list, Mr. Martin, in the Brain Injury ward. From the doorway I see the profile of a slender shaved head. As I near his bed, I take in the checkerboard of scars that crisscross the top of his skull, and notice the contortion of his mouth.

Wizened and skeletal, Mr. Martin lies almost motionless in his bed, yet he turns toward me and beams a crooked smile. I am struck by the radiance of his face and the lightness, almost joy, in his presence.

An elderly woman emerges from the bathroom and introduces herself as Mrs. Martin. Her face has the look of a well-worn dollar bill, creased and folded so many times that the entire surface has become a network of intersecting lines.

From the TV just above the bed, CNN announces the latest FBI findings in the terrorist investigation.

"I've been watching this ever since Tuesday morning", Mrs. Martin says. "I just sit and watch, and cry and cry, but I can't seem to turn it off. I can barely even talk about it now without tearing up..."

"...bughxs...ah...tiesss....foat ...outa ..ear!" I look at Mr. Martin and see that his nearly toothless mouth is moving at a pace that lags behind and betrays his thoughts, like

a projection glitch in a movie, where we see lips move seconds after the words have already been spoken. His eyes roam my face, eager for contact. I turn to his wife, unable to decode his message.

“Jim’s saying I cry buckets – so many tears he could float right out of here!”

Mr. Martin is laughing now, in hearty spasms and his wife and I join in.

“Seeet...choi..smi..ell.. er ...kie!”

“He says as he sees it, we have a choice either to smile at it all or to cry. So Jim does the smiling and I do the crying.” The two of them lock eyes tenderly and hold on.

I ask what had happened to bring Mr. Martin to the hospital. They both give a short laugh.

“This is actually Jim’s *fourth* time in Rehab.” She recounts to me how, eight years ago they discovered that her husband had a congenital brain defect, a misshapen tangled artery that finally twisted and ruptured, causing a massive internal hemorrhage and the first of four brain surgeries. At first the doctors had thought they could repair the damage and stop the bleeding, only to discover later that the best they could do was to install shunts in his skull to provide drainage for the continuous leaking.

Mrs. Martin describes each episode and how, the second time, six years ago Jim was home alone when the rupture occurred. She doesn’t to this day know how, but somehow, he was able to get to a phone to dial for help. She arrived home from the grocery store to find a firetruck, police car and ambulance all parked in her driveway, lights flashing.

“Knew...btttt...cah...fore...gottome.”

“He knew he’d better call for help before I got home....It was hard. Each time the surgeons stopped the rupture and put in new shunts. But this last time it wasn’t the artery.”

Mr. Martin releases his gaze from his wife and turns toward me, smiling almost sheepishly. “Fehh... kitch..crrck..ed... ohpuh.”

“This time Jim was getting up early as he likes to do, when the house is all quiet, early in the morning. He likes to make his Pop-Tart and cup of tea and watch the sun come up. Jim’s pretty good getting around the house with his walker.

Our son, Tom, was spending the night, sleeping in the guest room right next to the kitchen. He woke up when he heard a loud crash and went to go check it out. We still don’t know exactly how he fell. We think he just keeled over backward, ‘cause he has a tendency to lean backwards when he’s losing his balance.

Anyway, Tom took care of Jim in the kitchen and then came into the bedroom to wake me up. He told me “Mom, Dad had another fall. I’ve already called the ambulance. Just get dressed now and take a Xanax. *Don’t* come in the kitchen.”

“That morning was our fifty-first anniversary! I was so afraid he wasn’t going to make it through the day.”

“Buh...diuhd!” Mr. Martin happily exclaims, and for once I need no translation.

I look at his wife, who continues along, openly sharing the details of their recent ordeal. She stands tall and sturdy at the foot of the hospital bed, her eyes meeting her husband’s in a dance that does not want to end. Here is a woman who cannot speak of the loss of life in New York and D.C. without choking up, but who is a blazing tower of strength in her own family crisis.

I hear footsteps behind me and turn to see a middle aged man with soft features and generous proportions enter the room.

“Here’s Tom!”

“How are ya, Dad?”

“Cuhtt...cpain.!” Tom understands and returns his father’s wide grin. I look back at the older Martin and wonder whether he had also been of ample girth before being dismantled by disease.

His brain injuries occurred in a series, each one subtracting a little more from the man he once was. Now he lies before us, robbed of his ability to speak clearly or in complex sentences, his balance so impaired he may never walk again, and with scant remaining control over his muscles.

Yet Mr. Martin’s wife and son don’t see a man lampooned by the indiscriminate terror of time or fate. They have not allowed the awful subtractions to diminish the man they love. Instead, with each new blow they have seen the old façade being stripped away, revealing layer upon layer of beauty beneath.

I look down at Mr. Martin, who emits a joy that is contagious. Both he and his wife realize he may not make it to their next anniversary, but together with their son they are greeting each remaining day with the resolve to live it fully and the strength to help each other laugh.

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