

## Atrium

It is a seven-block walk from the Yale Sterling Library to the Yale-New Haven Hospital. For thirty-five years until my retirement from Surgery, I spent each working day and most nights at that hospital, albeit in buildings that have been either renovated so as to be unrecognizable, or razed. For the past sixteen years, I have spent every working day at the library where I read and write. Lately, I have taken to walking down to the hospital for lunch. In a courtyard set among the hospital buildings there are a dozen tiny ethnic food stands: Thai, Chinese, Mexican, Indian, “Soul,” Middle Eastern and just plain American. In good weather, one can dine alfresco on one of the benches. Otherwise, one can take a container of food into the hospital. Which brings me to the atrium, a vast open, high-ceilinged, bright space at whose center is a large modernist fountain that, at first glance, seems to be a great ball of water in motion. In fact, it is comprised of a stout erect metal pipe at the center and dozens of long, narrow-gauge, pipes that branch from it at angles. The openings at and near the ends of these secondary pipes are such that from each, a circular screen of water issues. These circles of water abut and overlap each other giving the illusion that the fountain is a gigantic ball of water. The water falls into a moat from which it is drained and recycled. A circle of lamps with copper reflectors illuminates the fountain from beneath the surface of the water in the moat. At any given time, numerous coins lie at the bottom of the moat where they were tossed by the hopeful and the desperate. The flow of these waters produces a continuous soft rushing noise.

Six quite tall ficus trees in pots rise well toward the glass cathedral ceiling that is braced by steel girders. The bark of the ficus is smooth and atrophic, cadaverous. The branches and roots, complex and interwoven, form a mesh at the bottom of the trunk. “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow?” Large planters holding ugly tropical plants—pink bromeliads and white anthurium—serve as a boundary to mark off that portion of the atrium used for eating from the rest which is carpeted and made to simulate a hotel lobby, with faux-wooden benches and comfortable chairs and tables. Other large houseplants in tubs—sanseveria, cut-leaf philodendron and giant dracaena—are placed here and there.

The immediate reason why I began to go there for lunch is that my vision has taken a turn for the worse. If only I could polish my lenses the way Spinoza polished his. I can read for only half an hour at a time without discomfort, and the world has become blurry. An interruption for an hour and a half at noon allows me to resume work later in the day (Can one go blind from having seen too much?). But that is not the only reason. Perhaps I go to the atrium to find characters for my stories. I admit that I peer out surreptitiously and eavesdrop but that too is not all. For me, the atrium is as much a bistro as it is a writer’s observation post, a bistro where I go to sit among people I don’t know, to enjoy their laughter, their earnestness, the pleasure they take in eating, and in each other. Perhaps I go there to be in the vicinity of the sick and their next-of-kin. It is with the sick that I feel a sense of belonging. The sick are my kind.

At noon, the atrium pullulates with people—visitors, doctors in green scrub suits fresh from the Operating Theatre, medical students in short white coats flaunting stethoscopes about the neck, nurses in white pants-suits carrying trays of food, patients in pajamas or hospital gowns, puffy, clean-cut well-groomed medical equipment salesmen with briefcases, waiting to show their wares to these doctors, maids vacuuming the carpet or cleaning the tables, janitors, orderlies. Each wears the uniform of his calling. And here and there, a patient brought there for diversion from the misery and boredom of illness.

At noon, as at any hour of the day or night, the atrium is never without the distant sound of sirens. Every now and then, the voice of the Page announces a “Code 5,” the term for an emergency, and the ward where it is taking place. This, to bring doctors and nurses scurrying to resuscitate. Once I was among those so summoned. And always the soft rushing noise of the fountain.

And then, one day, this:

I have just finished eating lunch, and am sitting on a bench in the atrium, a mere ten paces from the fountain with its murmur and glitter. In a wheelchair quite near sits a thin pale boy. He is bald; his lips are crusted, and with a sore at either corner of the mouth. Intravenous fluid drips into his left arm. The bottle hangs from a metal pole attached to the wheelchair over his head. In his lap, a plastic bottle of water with a straw. Now and then, the scabbed lips flutter apart and he takes a sip of air, then another. He looks to be about ten years old and weighs perhaps eighty pounds. His head is all eyes and ears. He seems to be studying me, with great interest, and without any restraint, the expression on his face one of glacial intelligence. It occurs to me that this boy hasn't the time for shame or restraint, only for honesty. It is inevitable that we should talk.

"What's that you're getting in the IV?" I ask. He glances for a moment at the bottle on the pole.

"It's my pet," he says, "follows me wherever I go."

"More like your guardian angel." He reacts not at all to this statement. I try again. "Something like a Hospital God. You know, like the ancient Gods of the hearth."

"Lares and Penatesi," he mutters. "You a doctor?"

"Used to be, long ago. Retired. I got old."

"A condition I won't ever have to face." I am shocked at the tone in which he says this. It is devoid of inflection or irony. I search all over my mouth for something to say. For a long moment we are silent.

"Who told you that?"

"Don't," he says. "I'm way past that."

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen." Another surprise. "And you?"

"Seventy-three. And a half. At my age, you count the halves."

"I'm going to tell you my name," he says, "but first I have to ask if it's OK."

"Of course it's OK."

"Don't be too sure. Now we are strangers, more or less anonymous. By giving you my name, I become somebody who can reach out to grab you, to capture. You could even want to grab me."

"I'll risk it."

"Thomas Fogarty." I see that the crusts on his lips hurt; he barely moves his mouth when he speaks.

"Richard. Richard Selzer," I reply.

"What would you like to talk about?" I ask, "Sports? Music?"

I feel scrutinized by the remorseless blue of his eyes.

"What will you do on your last day?"

"My last day?"

"The day when you are going to die."

"Can we talk about something else?" He gives a tiny shake of the head. The huge eyes insist; beneath them are smudges of violet. I'm caught and fluttering in that merciless gaze. He raises the water bottle to his lips and takes a tiny excruciating sip.

"Life hurts," he says. "I measure out the time by sips, see how few I can get along with."

Fourteen. I who have taken to forgetting everything at an alarming rate, remember my fourteenth birthday when, whispering my own name, I wept. At that age, I was already the man I would become in time, only more honest, braver than I am now. I too had not yet acquired irony. I was as intelligent then as now, as sensitive, as sorrowful.

I see at once that this boy is rare, that I must not falsely console or cajole; he wouldn't stand for it. He has already passed through the flames, gone beyond despair and self-pity. He seems enveloped in a shroud of quiet resignation. I see too the man he would have become, all intellect and sensibility. I know that his death is the only subject that interests him, this child that is father to the man. And why not? It is his work, his future. All at once, I feel ashamed of the good health that has enabled me to live so long, the unfairness of it. Something else too: I feel the stirring of what I can only describe as love for this small skinful of marrowless bones with his mouth encrusted with sores and his gaze that penetrates. Why shouldn't I love him, I who want so much to love?

"You don't have to feel embarrassed for your age. It doesn't matter," he says. My God! He has read my mind! Either he is intuitive or I am transparent.

"What I would do on my last day?" He gives a tiny nod. Above our heads, the leaves of the ficus trees are motionless; there is no breeze to stir them. The swords of the sansevaria slash the motionless air. I have the sense—does he have it too?—that he is the older one, that along with such sickness comes the wisdom, poise and integrity of years. This boy is ill in every way, but he is not ill-at-ease. That is my symptom. I hardly dare to speak. I begin.

"On the morning of the day I die, I'll betake myself to the edge of a forest, or be taken there by someone strong enough to carry me deep into the woods. Let it be a forest of great age with huge old oak, beech and linden trees and a dense canopy above that permits rays of light to slant down to the forest floor. 'Put me there,' I'll tell him, 'on that bed of shadow. Arrange me upon it. Now wet my lips with a little wine,' and then 'Goodbye, with my thanks. I'll go the rest of the way by myself.'" I see that the boy is listening intently, his eyes feasting on my face. The long gracile neck that lifts his small head toward me—it must take a thousand years to form a neck of such delicacy, and with the power to break one's heart.

"I'll hum or recite, a little of both, maybe, just to hear the sound of my voice. When it stops. . . ." All at once, a tuning fork vibrates to a blow. "May I start over?"

The boy, Thomas, nods. I begin again. "It had all been arranged the night before. It is noon when the doorbell rings. Noon, that hour when both hands of the clock are raised up in supplication. From my bed, I can hear his deep voice rumbling. I recognize it as the voice of a former student of mine. Long ago I led him through his first appendectomy, his first herniorrhaphy. Now he is a great surgeon. It is a bond between us. He is big enough to fill the doorway of my room. He bends above the bed and scoops me up against his chest. I feel quite secure in his arms. 'Did you bring it? The wine?' I ask him. 'Oh yes I did. It's in the pick-up truck.'

"We ride for a long time. When the truck stops, he gets out and comes around to where I am reclining. Once again, he lifts me up against him. And he walks into the woods for a good way to where great old trees are deeply rooted in the earth and their canopies sway overhead. Here, the undergrowth is thicker. There are no paths. Not far away there is a small stream that splashes downward over rocks. A pair of mallards browses among the sad rushes. The iridescent green head of the male! I point down to a shadow on the ground. It is just my size. 'There,' I tell him, 'put me there.' And he does, deposits me gently upon a bed of moss, with fern fronds under my head for a pillow.

"I'd rather stay with you,' he says.

"No,' I tell him.

"Do you mind if I wait in the truck?"

"No, I don't mind, only don't come back until morning. Promise.'

"Alright.'

"In the morning, when you come, perhaps I'll be gone. Perhaps not. If I'm still here, cover me with earth and leaves so that I won't be cold. If I am gone, then you will know that I have become part of the forest. Don't try to know everything. Some mysteries are not meant to be solved; they are meant to be deepened.'

"Now I am alone in the depths of the pious forest. I feel light, buoyant, partly made of sky, as if an obscure transmutation is taking place, the sort of thing that is probably happening all the time, only we are unaware of it." I

glance at the boy in the wheelchair wondering if he has understood me. He seems to be listening with more than his ears, but with his entire body, his flesh and his bones as well. And I know that he has understood fully.

“There is the fragrance of pine tar, mushrooms and trees. It is so fresh that I cannot stop yawning. But different from the freshness of April. It is October, after all. In this fragrance it is easier to breathe. I inhale deeply and relish the expansion of my chest. How fine it is to fill my lungs with air, using my whole chest. I cannot inhale too much air. Oh yes, I breathe deeply and with a steady rhythm, raising up and lowering with each breath like a barque on a tranquil sea. I am all breathing now. The forest breathes with me. I take part in the breathing of the forest. It is as if I have not yet been born, and am in the womb of my mother. I hear noises, the squeaking of a branch, a skittering as of tiny feet running through leaves. A chipmunk, perhaps. Or a fox. I send myself off in different directions. Strange, but I can see myself, the way one sees a mirage. From the truck, I look like a fawn. From the treetops, I am a smudge on the ground.

“I fall asleep and dream that the trees, the rocks, the little stream are peopled by spirits. I am aware of an unknown, unseen splendor. I am happy in the dream of it. To dream so is to be mighty. When I awaken, it is toward dusk. Hour by hour, my mind separates itself from my body. I explore my imagination. Now I know that death is just a different kind of existence. Matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Call it whatever you will, it is only the form that changes in death. I become aware of the fluidity of things—not only memory and imagination—but the cells of the body too. There is an inner stream of life composed of blood, cytoplasm, nucleoprotein. It is all flowing.” The boy’s lips are parted; his breathing has speeded up, gone shallow; his eyes that never leave my face are shining. Only rarely does he blink or run the tip of his tongue over his crusted, ulcerated mouth. Once or twice, I raise the cup to his lips until he takes a tiny wracking sip. All the while I speak in a low murmur that now and then disappears into a whisper so as to underline the privacy of what is passing between us, saying that it is meant only for him. One hand reaches toward me; I surrender a handful of my shirt to it.

“Night is falling and with it comes the feeling of imminence; something is about to happen. Darkness enters my body; I let it. The air around me shifts with the movement of actual angels. Solicitous spiders are weaving me a coverlet. I am the whispering of leaves, more guessed at than seen. Already I am only half flesh and blood, the rest—moss, leaf, bark and oiled fur. Soon I shall be a line of bubbles rising to the surface of life, then winking out. The odor is intoxicating—pine, mushroom, and something herbal. It makes me sleepy. I can hardly keep my eyes open. I yawn. Now I close my eyes, conscious of the world through my hearing alone. It is the deepest kind of repose. Crickets are stridulating, and something curious that chatters and comes and goes as it pleases. I feel the weight of the moonlight upon me like a soft comforter upon the body of a sleeper. I let the forest sprawl across my mind and, all at once, I feel myself inside the vista I have imagined. The night is a confusion of stars and fireflies. I cannot tell which is farther away, the one becoming the other, the here becoming there. It is a painless transition. I am filled with what I can only call amen or so-be-it.”

“So, Thomas.” I say, in the voice of conclusion, “that is how it will be.”

“Oh don’t stop!” he says. “Tell me more. Please.” The thin cotton hospital gown has come untied so that his left clavicle is outlined over its entire length. The slender graceful bone stands out below the fleshless neck, so much older and wiser than all the rest of his body. His expression is vague, yet insistent, as though he has already departed for somewhere else.

“But there isn’t any more.”

“Then tell it again.” Do I imagine it, or has his face taken on a glitter, as with fever?

Suddenly there is a third person present. A nurse in a red pants suit with a shower cap on her head, a mask hanging loosely at her neck, and white running shoes. Her manner is grimly cheerful, efficient.

“O.K. Tony,” she says in a loud bluff voice. “Time to go back to bed. We’ll be getting a blood transfusion

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this afternoon.” I am appalled by her falsely hearty manner and distressed for the boy who clearly knows that hers is a professional pose.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “I’m used to it. They mean well.” Once again, he has read my mind!

Tony! So it is not Thomas, after all. He did not give me his real name. Could he have thought that by taking another name, he could unload his illness upon that fictional alter ego? With what reluctance do those fingers release that handful of shirt. The wheelchair with its contents is already being propelled away. From across the atrium, I follow with my eyes the radiance that accompanies it.

He was right in saying that by learning his name I could be captured. And so I am writing him down on these pages, not to dispense with him, but in the hope that, by doing so, I will save him, not as a human being, no, but as a character in a story, so that he will not be lost. He will have had conferred upon him a continuing life.

It is the next day, a quarter past twelve. All morning, my mind has been empty of thought other than of him. I am sitting in the atrium on the same bench. Tony is not there. From across the atrium, I see the same nurse in the red pants suit, shower cap, mask and white running shoes come toward me.

“Tony died this morning. All yesterday afternoon, he dictated this letter to you. I promised I would deliver it.” And then she was gone.

“Dear Richard,

It is just as you said it would be. Already I see myself lying upon a shadow in the forest where you have placed me, my head resting on a pillow of moss. I hear the sound of the waterfall. It is not unlike the sound of the fountain in the atrium. From the brim of a cup scooped in bark, I drink an ample swallow of pale, icy air. It does not hurt to do so. Like you, I sing or hum *sotto voce* vague melodies which I compose then and there. All around me there is a labyrinth of shadows. I too am ‘the whispering of leaves, more guessed at than seen.’ Already, I too am made half of bark and oiled fur. Only a web of life still clings to my skin. I haven’t the strength to shake it off, nor would I want to. Thanks to you, I have been made privy to the mystery of things. Your words move among the shadows, stirring the leaves. They make me think of “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. ‘The silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain.’ I wonder if you know that line, and love it as much as I do. My eyes are not entirely shut, like those of a cat sunning itself and drowsing. Between fluttering lids my fuzzy vision is bordered by a gleam from far away. A moment ago, when the dawn came, it took me by surprise. As if it were the first dawn that ever was—rose yellow and”

At that point, the letter ends. I feel my body seated on the bench as the fated atrium with its cadaverous ficus trees, its penumbra of death whirls toward infinity. Then I listen to the sound of the fountain and I hear the blood coursing through the atria of my heart.

I had given him one of my dreams to play with. It was a ruse, a deception, I know. I who believe in nothing supernatural made use of it to prepare this boy for his death. It was as if my soul had, after years of retirement, put on again its scrub suit, mask and cap, and had taken up its scalpel.

Why did I write this? I wanted to save him from the anonymity of death. There are characters in the books I have read, and the paintings I have seen who are more real to me than the people I meet in daily life who yet wear the futility of flesh and blood. By writing him down in the pages of my notebook, I would give him that stronger reality, turn him into words and rescue him. But now I must begin a convalescence from an illness I never had. There are times when I think that it is he who has entered a new life, and I who am dead. Oh, let the truth be known—I wanted to keep him for myself. He is unto me like a fountain in my mind, a place where it is always cool

and fresh and where I can go to partake of its coolness. Now and then, a bit of spray will lay itself gently upon my face. In the days since, again and again Tony is brought back to me with stunning clarity by some errant gust or faint aroma. Then it is that the world trembles around me. The sky above the atrium quivers, the plants and trees ripple, the whole atrium founders until I feel his gaze, clear and true upon me, and I carry him in my arms, against my chest and look into the lucid blue of his eyes.

“There,” he says, pointing, “Place me there.”

It is so that I am farther from him than he is from me. I have only to close my eyes to see him sitting in the atrium, his Johnny shirt having come untied to expose one perfect clavicle. I think I have never seen anything more beautiful, more heartbreaking than that slender bone beneath his skin. It is for me a relic. I see too how, at the arrival of the nurse to take him away, the bottle of intravenous fluid trembled as if a train had just passed a cottage at night, and a picture on the wall shook gently. There he is, lying where I have placed him, in the shadow at the foot of a linden tree, his pale hand at his side as a leaf might have come to rest there. Sometimes I speak to him.

“With your eyes,” I tell him, “lift this tree up, up until it touches the sky so that you can climb it all the way to Heaven.” When I see the fugitive smile upon his ruined mouth, I know why I was born.

### An Explication:

The atrium itself is immediately and intensely visual, rendered with a great deal of precise detail—the plants, the skylight, the furnishings and above all the fountain. Despite the constant activity taking place within it, there is a sense of the inert, the lifeless, as well as a certain vulgarity. It is a product of pretension and interior decoration, as well as an attempt to disguise the true nature and purpose of the hospital. It is a denial of death in architectural terms. Such is the landscape, the theatre where the story takes place. It is the presence of the boy in the atrium that lends it dignity and taste. Later on, there will be the equally precise portrayal of the forest, and the inevitable contrast between the two. The forest is clean, pristine, mysterious, subtle. It is devoid of plastic, artificial wood, unnatural vegetation, paint and varnish. It is also devoid of pus, pain, lesions. It is what a hospice is, in contrast to a hospital—the ultimate refuge, a triumphant place where the imagination reigns and one is free of the agony and terror of mortality.

What are we to make of this short story, if we can even call it a short story? It is hardly more than an encounter between an old doctor and a dying boy, one of those fated moments when two trajectories intersect and there is a sudden moment of revelation. Is the story true? Did it happen? Yes, it is true. It happened. There was just such a coming together of the two in the atrium of the hospital. But any reliance on narrative is problematical. We cannot be sure how much external reality has become annexed by the author's imagination and transformed by his fantasies. In fact, I suspect he has tinkered with the facts, left out a good deal, accented this, and not that. This is called artistry. Nor is he at all obsessed with the minute technical problems associated with the writing of prose. In all likelihood, his love affair with the technical ended with his retirement from surgery. He is no longer a physician, a man of science; he has reverted to a more primitive form of being, one who is receptive to certain subtle influences and to intuition. The doctor in the story knows that he is performing a secret, sacred initiation upon the boy. He hurls himself into this primitive rite recklessly, forgetting himself until that very moment when he hesitates and says to the boy: “That's all there is. There isn't any more.” “Then tell it again!” the boy pleads, clutching his sleeve. The doctor's loss of nerve is masked by the arrival of the nurse. The

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story “Atrium” flies in the face of science. It tries to keep the mysteries of life from being mowed down by the juggernaut of technology.

Is the story sentimental? Of course it is sentimental. Some of the greatest works of art are—all of Dickens, much of Verdi, the paintings of the Virgin and Child. But it is not the false sentimentality that consists of emotions one does not truly feel. It is further saved from sentimentality by the beauty of language. Alright, it is a sad piece, one that has brought a lump in your throat. Perhaps you have shed tears. And that is good. I wouldn’t want to live in a world where it never happens that one can weep precisely because another wept. Without sorrow, without compassion, the spirit shrivels.

Is it likely that a fourteen year old boy would or could write such a letter? No, it is unlikely, but it is possible. At fourteen, I was quite capable of writing such a letter. Let us not forget that at age fifteen, Rimbaud was writing some of the great poems of rebellion. It is well-known that mathematicians reach the peak of their genius in their teens, then quickly decline. Besides, it takes no great leap of the imagination to conclude that the doctor and the boy Tony are one and the same, that, in the act of preparing the boy for his death, the doctor has prepared for his own. By the end of the story, both doctor and Tony experience an epiphany when the continuum of mortality and immortality is sensed.

This story was not written with a dry pen, but with one dipped in my body’s fluids. Nor was it written easily and quickly, but with a good deal of pain. As the author, I must always be grateful for the improbable gift of the instant when I glanced up to find the boy of the fountain looking at me.

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