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The Witness

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The Witness · *Richard Selzer*

THE BOY IN THE BED is the length of a six year old. But something about him is much younger than that. It is the floppiness, I think. His head lolls as though it were floating in syrup. Now and then he unfurls his legs like a squid. He has pale yellow hair and pale blue eyes. His eyes will have none of me, but gaze as though into a mirror. He is blind. The right cheek and temple are deeply discolored. At first I think it is a birthmark. Then I see that it is a bruise.

"Does he walk?" I ask.

"No."

"Crawl?"

"He rolls. His left side is weak." The mother tells me.

"But he has a strong right arm," says the father. I touch the dark bruise that covers the right side of the child's face where he has again and again punched himself.

"Yes, I see that he is strong."

"That's how he tells us that he wants something, or that something hurts. That, and grinding his teeth."

"He doesn't talk, then?"

"He has never been heard to utter a word," says the mother as though repeating a statement from a written case history.

I unpin the diaper and lay it open. A red lump boils at the child's groin. The lump is the size of a walnut. The tissues around it slope off into pinkness. Under the pressure of my fingers, the redness blanches. I let up and the redness returns. I press again. Abruptly the right arm of the child flails upward and his fist bumps against his bruised cheek.

"You're hurting him," says the father.

The eyes of the child are terrible in their sapphiric emptiness. Was there not one tiny seed of vision in them? I know that there is not. The optic nerves have failed to develop; the pediatrician has told me. Such blindness goes all the way back to the brain.

"It is an incarcerated hernia," I tell them. "An emergency operation will be necessary to examine the intestine that is trapped in the sac. If the bowel is not already gangrenous, it will be replaced inside the peritoneal cavity, and then we will fix the hernia. If the circulation of the bowel has already been compromised, we will remove that section and stitch the ends together."

"Will there be . . . ?"

"No," I say. "There will be no need for a colostomy." All this they understand at once. The young woman nods.

"My sister's boy had the same thing," she says.

I telephone the Operating Room to schedule the surgery, then sit at the desk to write the pre-operative orders on the chart. An orderly arrives with a stretcher for the boy. The father fends off my assistance and lifts the child onto the stretcher himself.

“Is there any danger?”

“There is always danger. But we will do everything to prevent trouble.” The stretcher is already moving down the corridor. The father hurries to accompany it.

“Wait here,” I say to him at the elevator. “I will come as soon as we are done.” The man looks long and deep at the child, gulping him down in a single radiant gaze.

“Take good care of my son,” he says. I see then that he loves the boy as one can only love his greatest extravagance, the one thing that will impoverish him totally, will give him cold and hunger and pain in return for his love. As the door to the elevator closes I see the father standing in the darkening corridor, his arms still making a cradle in which the smoke of twilight is gathering. I wheel the stretcher into the Operating Room from which the father has been banished. I think of how he must dwell for now in a dark hallway across which, from darker doorways, the blinding cries of sick children streak and crackle. What is his food, that man out there? Upon what shall he live but the remembered smiles of this boy?

On the operating table the child flutters and tilts like a moth burnt by the beams of the great overhead lamp. I move the lamp away from him until he is not so precisely caught. In this room where everything is green, the child is green as ice, translucent, a fish seen through murk, and dappled. I hold him upon the table while the anesthetist inserts a needle into a vein on the back of the child’s left hand, the one that is weak. Bending above, I can feel the boy’s breath upon my neck. It is clean and hay-scented as the breath of a calf. What malice made this? Surely not God! Perhaps he is a changeling—an imperfect child put in place of another, a normal one that had been stolen by the fairies. Yes, I think. It is the malice of the fairies.

Now the boy holds his head perfectly still, cocked to one side. He seems to be listening. I know that he is . . . listening for the sound of his father’s voice. I speak to the boy, murmur to him, hum to him. But I know it is not the same. Take good care of my son, the father had said. Why must he brandish his love at me? I am enough beset. But I know that he must. I think of the immensity of love and I see for a moment what the father must see—the soul that lay in the body of the child like a chest of jewels in a sunken ship. Through the fathoms, it glows. I cup the child’s feet in one hand. How cold they are! I should like to lend him my cat to drape over them. I am happiest in winter with my cat for a foot pillow. No human has ever been so kind, so voluptuous as my cat. Now the child is asleep. Under anesthesia he looks completely normal. So! It is only wakefulness that diminishes him.

The skin has been painted with antiseptic and draped. I make the incision across the apex of the protuberance. Almost at once, I know that this is no incarcerated hernia, but a testicle that had failed to descend into the scrotum. Its energy for the long descent had given out. Harmlessly it hung in mid-canal until now when it twisted on its little cord and cut off its own blood supply. The testicle is no longer viable. The black color of it tells me so. I cut into the substance of the testicle to see if it will bleed. It does not. It will have to be removed.

“You’ll have to take it out, won’t you?” It is the anesthesiologist speaking. “It won’t do him any good now. Anyway, why does he need it?”

Yes, yes, I know. . . . Wait. And I stand at the table filled with loathing for my task. Precisely because he has so little left, because it is of no use to him . . . I know, and I tie the spermatic cord with a silk suture, and I cut off the testicle. Lying upon a white gauze square, it no longer appears mad, threatening, but an irrefutable witness to these events, a testament. I close the wound.

I am back in the solarium of the Pediatric Ward. It is empty save for the young couple and myself.

“He is fine,” I tell them. “He will be in the Recovery Room for an hour, and then they will bring him back here. He is waking up now.”

“What did you do to my son?” The father’s eyes have the glare of black olives.

“It wasn’t a hernia,” I explain. “I was wrong. It was an undescended testicle that had become twisted on its cord. I had to remove it.” The mother nods minutely. Her eyes are the same blue gem from which the boy’s have been struck. There is something pure about the woman out of whose womb this child had blundered to knock over their lives. As though the mothering of such a child had returned her to a state of virginity. The father slumps in his chair, his body doubled as though it were he who had been cut in the groin. There in the solarium he seems to be aging visibly, the arteries in his body silting up. Yellow sacs of flesh appear beneath his eyes. His eyes themselves are peopled with red ants. I imagine his own slack scrotum. And the hump on his back—flapping, dithering, drooling, reaching up to hit itself on the cheek, and listening, always listening for the huffing of the man’s breath.

Just then, the room is plunged into darkness.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “A power failure. There is an accessory generator. The lights will go on in a moment.” We are silent, as though the darkness has robbed us of speech as well. I cannot see the father, but like the blind child in the Recovery Room, I listen for the sound of his voice.

The lights go on. Abruptly, the father rises from his chair.

“Then he is alright.”

“Yes.” I nod. Relief snaps open on his face. He reaches for his wife’s hand. They stand there together, smiling. And all at once I know that this man’s love for his child is a passion. It is a rapids roiling within him. It has nothing to do with pleasure, this kind of love. It is a deep black joy.