

John Paul

“This has been the worst time of my life,” Doris said. She slipped the grey sweater from her shoulders, letting it fall over the back of the chair in the casual way women have that always seems so feminine to me.

“It can’t be easy for you,” I said.

She would have been called pretty years ago. Somewhere in her sixties now, she was still attractive. With slender hands, Doris lifted the paper cup of coffee from the cafeteria’s white table and took a sip, first touching her lips to the dark liquid ever so hesitantly.

“I’ve never really known you,” she said after a moment. “I always felt bad that all we ever talked about were my problems and John Paul. I shouldn’t have cried on your shoulder all the time”

I almost said, “Well, this is a place of tears.” But I knew it would sound trite.

However, it was true. Lake Manning’s Head Trauma Center was the end of the line for the many brain damaged patients. Their torn bodies and minds would die here within the antiseptic pastel walls.

Often sitting by their bedsides were mothers and fathers, husbands, wives and children. Sometimes a spouse stared at a loved one, who could no longer provide physical solace, a dear heart and life’s companion whose eyes were now dimmed and empty of any understanding. Families found themselves coping in the aftermath of a sudden accident or a wretched brain disease. They might face a heart wrenching test of their love, confronting what was once a beautiful person, now left a near vegetable, forever disintegrated.

Not quite a year before, I had met Doris and John Paul when a hospital in New Jersey released the 27 year old young man and shipped him here to the Head Trauma Center. As a counselor intern, I worked with ambulatory patients and spent a lot of time in the hallways looking for clients who had little else to do but wander about aimlessly, often forgetting their appointments, if not their pants.

As I turned a corner on 2-South, a woman came down the hall pushing a young man in his specialized half-reclining wheel chair. Throwing his head from side, John Paul lurched his body back and forth as he made

snorting and whinnying noises in obvious distress. His mother, Doris, tried to soothe him, speaking softly through her tears.

I walked up to them and offered my assistance. “He’s just very angry,” Doris said. “Can you help me get him to his room?” Remembering a technique from teaching, I grabbed his arm and squeezed it tightly in a gesture of authority I hoped would get his attention. His eyes raised to mine with a look of fear and deep misery. As I held his gaze for a moment, I saw much more in his countenance than I was used to seeing in most head trauma victims.

I succeeded in shooing Doris off to the cafeteria while I pushed John Paul to his room and found a nurse to get him into bed. I stayed with him a short time to try to calm him down. That began my friendship with the young man, which would last some months until he died, an event I still can’t call good or bad.

My intern assignment brought me to the Center twice each week. I began to arrive twenty minutes early, so I could stop to “talk” to John Paul. God knows, he needed the company. The look he had given me at our first meeting, filled with woe, also held a high degree of intelligence and awareness of his situation. He was truly “stuck inside,” with a functioning brain and personality imprisoned in a body that allowed him to barely do more than grunt.

Doris had brought an album of photos of John Paul in which he could be seen happily astride his motorcycle, hunting with his now deceased father, fishing with a pretty young woman, shooting beers in a favorite hangout . . . all taken before the accident in the quarry where he had worked. Missing the brake pedal one rainy afternoon, John Paul had inadvertently backed his dump truck over a cliff. His life had gone over with it.

Pointing to a photo, I would ask him how he had caught the large trout he held and he would smile and gesticulate and make noises and be happy for a moment. But soon the frustration of being unable to speak brought tears to his eyes. However, these short moments of enjoyment seemed worthwhile, as his mind wandered back to the old times.

Although John Paul usually was affable with myself and the staff, he often acted out his frustrations on Doris and could be very nasty to her. Maybe he thought she was the only person who wouldn’t strike back at him and, if so, he was right. Still, Doris distanced herself from John Paul over time, unable to cope with his constant attempts to slap her, his hands flailing out wildly as he spit out cries and unknown curses. She began to spend less time with her son and instead found work to do

around the Center. A capable artist, she began to give informal lessons in the dayroom to patients who could pull a pencil across a piece of paper and produce anything that would make them smile with accomplishment.

My internship ended and although I stopped back a couple of times to see John Paul, other assignments occupied me until my wife and I took our annual sojourn south for the winter months. We're retirees and I work only a dozen hours each week.

Sifting through the box of old mail from Post Office when I returned north in the spring, I opened a card from Doris and saw the news. John Paul had died. I called her cell phone and we met later that week in the Trauma Center's cafeteria, where we had often shared a cup of coffee. Now, as we settled into the back corner at a small table, she told me of John Paul's final minutes.

Coming back from the dayroom one afternoon she found her son's room in chaos as the nursing staff frantically tried to save his life from a stroke.
"I stood there, wanting to shout at the nurses, 'Stop. Stop. Let him go!' But I'm his mother. How could I even feel that way?"

"You wanted him at peace," I said.
"Yes," she answered, "and I just couldn't take any more. The traveling back and forth, John Paul's meanness to me, the bills. I couldn't work. I'd begun to live off my savings. There was a man, but that would have never worked in this situation."

"Those are real problems, things to be angry about. You can't blame yourself for the way you felt."

Doris sipped her coffee in silence.

"You were so nice to him," she said. You would go through his photo albums and ask him about hunting, his fishing trips..... You couldn't understand his answers, I know. I wondered why you kept coming back. You have a big heart."

"I don't. But every time I would visit him, he would take my hand as I left and try to shake it. And he would cry."

Doris' eyes began to brim up with tears.
"Every time I left him," she said, "he would try to spit at me."

I didn't know what to say.
"He hated me," she said.
"I'm sure he didn't."

"He hated me for being the only person left for him after his father died, after his friends deserted him, after everything."

A silence enveloped us. I tried to understand how one could hate the only person left to him. Maybe that was the sin, being the only who cared.

Doris looked at me and held my eyes for a moment.

"I have cancer," she said.

"Doris, I'm sorry...."

"I want you to take his photo albums home with you. Will you promise me to open them and look at them every August 14th? That's his birthday."

"Of course I will."

She sat there and cried quietly.

"There was nothing I could do for him," she said, finally.
"All I can do now is find someone willing to remember him. He was such a beautiful boy."

"He seemed a very nice young man."

"I can't stand to think no one will be here to remember him. I want to keep him real," she said. "Will you do that for me?"

Doris died shortly after she gave me the albums. I went to her funeral in New Jersey. No one else came, except the pastor from a nearby church, who mispronounced her last name. From somewhere, he brought a wedding photo of Doris and her husband from long ago, a date written on the back of the photo. When I left the wake, without even looking around to see if I was alone, I picked up the photo and put it under my coat. It sits now with their son's albums on my bookshelf. On April 5th of each year, their wedding anniversary, I place the photo on my piano for the day,

Many books fill the shelves of this old house. Too many now to keep track of, to tell the truth. John Paul's photos are among them and I do indeed get his albums out to turn their pages each August. I haven't the slightest idea who all of the people are that I'm looking at, except for John Paul and Doris. I'm the only one left for them, but I know they don't hate me for that.

In the evening on each August 14th, when I put John Paul's albums back on the book shelf, I feel him shaking my hand. But he doesn't cry. I do.

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The Press at Windswept Farm

Saugerties, NY

www.windsweptpress.com