

Johnny Get Your Rear Window

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I saw the movie "Johnny Get Your Gun" in high school English class. I read the book too, it was good; but not as effective as Catch-22 in terms of war protest. I bring it up because the situation in Johnny Get Your Gun has become a rather monolithic part of my consciousness. It's not just the book though because the Metallica video "Enter Sandman" best captures the desperation inherent in being one of the small minority of people who are best described as the living dead. The video is better because you get the gist of the movie, with a really good guitar solo about ¾ of the way through. This is my opinion anyway, and I am in a good place to know.

Everything on my body is dead; attached, but worthless. My arms hang at my sides, my legs might as well be your legs. I cannot talk, move my head, or scratch my nose. I've been in the same hospital bed for two months with a catheter and a tube up my ass that sucks my crap into a bag, it's all very unpleasant. I get the shivers just thinking about the fact that there's a tube *in* my penis. But it's life and you take what life dishes out and you do the best you can, which for me, is to do nothing at all.

There is one thing that I count as a real blessing. I can see. I can look out the window and watch the birds. My eyes blink, but only involuntarily. This is frustrating because often nurses will think they are communicating with me. They aren't. Sometimes my eyes blink once, sometimes twice, sometimes three times, I don't have a damn thing to do with it. As a result they are always doing things to me or for me that I don't want. For example the Nurse might ask, "Do you want me to take you away from the window?" It's understood that it's one blink for yes two blinks for no. I can honestly say that I wish I could remain eternally looking out the window. If I have to be stuck in a hospital in a city, I at least want to be able to feel the sunshine on my face and see the comings and goings of the people on the street. Yet all too often my eyes betray me and I end up stuck back in bed with nothing to look at but the stupid TV.

I can't control my blinking but I can control what I look at. Which is nice.

The brain, as it turns out, is a really goofy thing.

When I close my eyes and think about my life and what I am, I can actually hear the heavy-ass thundering guitar as James Hatfield (Metallica's guitar player/singer) growls "I cannot live, I cannot die..." I can see myself lying in my bed, my body intact but as far from me as Philadelphia is from Bangkok.

You probably don't know it, but consciously lifting your arm over your head is a miracle. It is so mundane a miracle, you may not have noticed. Don't feel bad, most people haven't. (You may also be wondering, how can a person this incapacitated write a story. You should probably shut up and stop asking so many questions.) You probably think lifting your arm is as easy as turning the channel on the TV. (Remote controls- another mundane miracle if you think about it.) And it is I guess, as long as that mysterious thingee in your head keeps doing what it's supposed to.

Unfortunately for me it doesn't always do what it's supposed to. I guess anything that complicated will get a bug or two in it over time. My problem was that the bug turned into a major malfunction that led to what was essentially a primary systems meltdown. Nobody has been able to figure out how it happened, or why. One morning I was free; the next I was totally paralyzed, life has a viscous sense of humor.

I like to use computer terms to discuss my mental states, after all, it's the hippest metaphor in Cognitive Science. Anyway, when the you that is inside gets separated from the you that usually interacts with the outside world, well then you really find out how truly stark the line between *res extensis* and *res cogitans* actually is.

Intentionality, and a Metallica song are what I'm all about. Intentionality is one of those mundane miracles I was talking about, in fact it's the bridge between the world inside and the one outside. Once I lost it, I saw how miraculous it was and wanted to know more. I hate the irony of the fact that I can't explore the topic now that I see how miraculous it is. When I still had intentionality I accepted it with the casual attitude of an evening meal.

I don't know exactly what time it was. It was late, I know that. There was a nurse just outside my line of vision, I could see her legs, propped up on a chair, she was writing in my chart, I could hear her pen as the ball-point spun across the paper. She was facing the window too. Three or four times a day they would prop me up like a teddy bear so that I could see out the window. From where I sat I had two distinct vistas of scenery. A large chunk of hospital took up the left side of my vision, the entire place was windows and I spent a good amount of time watching the goings on in the place. I knew which cleaning people took naps in empty rooms, which nurses watched TV more than their patients. I knew which ones were good too, the ones who held their patient's hands, talked to them with respect and compassion, and kept a close eye on things.

The right side of my vision was far more inspiring even if it wasn't necessarily always as interesting. On the right side was the wide open blue sky. A blue as brilliant as the sea some days, without a hint of white cloud to mar the hue. Other days the sky would be gray, and dark clouds would speed past my window like lazy prowlers. Sometimes at night I could see the North Star, but usually it was just plain old darkness. As a result, I spent most of my window time at night watching the goings on in the hospital.

I couldn't make out the person's face because it didn't seem like there was any. Like the boogiemer in that movie Jacob's Ladder; a dark maw gaped where the mouth should be, a bump delineated the nose and shallow sockets lurked where the eyes should have been. Sitting there, watching this figure I tried to tell myself that it was dark. I told myself that I was pretty far away and I couldn't be sure of the details of what I was seeing. I told myself that there might have been a face, that the shadows were obscuring them, but I knew that this was just me acting all 12-step, hung up in denial. Face or not the

thing was *wrong* somehow. It made me feel in my mental gut the way thinking about the catheter did. Seeing this man or thing or whatever, even from the other side of the hospital made me nauseous and afraid.

A dark coat hung on the tall figure, the coat was a deep green and I could make out what appeared to be a US flag on the sleeve that was facing in my direction. The apparition just stood there in the doorway of the room, it's no-face looking at whoever was in the bed. Time sat frozen like that for I don't know how long; me looking at the figure looking at the patient.

When the thing moved, it did so with a liquid quickness. In what looked like a single fluid motion it glided across the room and stopped right next to the bed.

The knife didn't surprise me. It was a "Scream" sized butcher knife the blade long and curved. The man materialized the knife out of his loose fitting coat like a magician taking a quarter from behind a little kid's ear. I couldn't tell much about the patient that lay in the bed, I could only see legs under a blanket, and the head of the bed blocked most of the view of whoever was laying there.

My nurse walked into my vision, blocking the view. There wasn't a thing I could do to draw her attention to look out the window. I had been spending a lot of time feeling sorry for myself, bemoaning my being paralyzed, hating whatever force allowed such a thing to happen to me. Only now, the true despair of my situation was realized, not through my inability to act for myself, but from my inability to act for others.

All I could do was sit there as the nurse sponged the dirt that somehow found my body in spite of my lack of moving around. For brief seconds the nurse would move out of the way, allowing me the briefest of glances into the far room. My eyes would frantically search for the proper window, but no sooner would I find it than the nurse would once again block my view.

Normally, I enjoyed the sponge bath. I couldn't move my arms, but I could feel them. Which was nice when I got my baths, but terrible when something scratched. There have been times, I try not to think about them, that I would have gladly eaten cyanide in exchange for an end to the infernal desire to scratch my shoulder.

I usually enjoy the cool air on my wet skin, feeling the sensation of goose bumps. These were supposed to be the joys of my current life. Now I just wanted to see, wanted to tell the nurse that something very bad was going on over there, only there was no voice, no movement allowed me. I just sat, Pinocchio, not a real boy.

I am alive, but I have no body. I have a sack that houses my intellect, such that it is. But the ability to interact was gone, with my body, and therefore, the world beyond myself. Loneliness isn't the physical separation from people, it is the mental separation from people.

After what seemed like an eternity the bath was over and my Nurse walked clear of my vision. I found the window and wasn't surprised to see that there was nobody there. I was surprised to see that the bed was gone and the patient along with it. Maybe I imagined what I thought I saw, but I don't think so. I would bet that nobody knows where that patient went. And there is no way for me to find out. I can just lay here. Maybe if the patient disappeared word will work its way to the nurses on my unit, maybe I'll be able to overhear somebody talking about it. I didn't think the nurses realize it, but I spend most of my time doing my level best to hear their conversations.

Of course, I didn't actually see anything happen. There is, I must keep reminding myself, a possibility that I misunderstood the entire thing. Maybe whoever was in that bed was being taken to surgery or something.

I believed that for a week until I saw the figure again. This time on the fifth floor. This time the nurse didn't step in front of me and I saw the knife come down. After the third downward strike I averted my eyes to the darkness of the night sky, starless because of the bright light of the street lamps below. After a minute or two I allowed myself to look back toward the window and managed to catch the back of the figure as it wheeled the bed out of the hospital.

I was afraid just seeing what was happening. Terrified actually, filled with an existential dread that would have made Sartre blush. I didn't think I could be any more afraid. But then I saw a nurse in the hallway step out of this ghouls way. Even from my great distance, I could see that the nurse didn't like this fellow, or what he was doing. But he stepped out of the way and let him pass. The figure wheeled the bed out of sight and the nurse just stepped into the room and tidied up.

It's happened four more times that I have witnessed. It always happens late at night, and there is never any alarm. I have never seen a cop show up in one of the rooms, and unbelievably, I haven't heard anyone say a single word about it. I know that at least six people have been murdered by this thing and there is no way that nobody's talking about it. Hell, six people just disappearing from a hospital should be a CNN story to rival Gary Condit. Yet there isn't a word. I've been here long enough to know, a hospital has a built in gossip factory to rival any modern tabloid, and the silence is downright unnerving. It is like it isn't happening. Only it is happening and I can't do anything about it. Sooner or later I know that it will be my time, that the figure will come to visit me. I will be wheeled out the door, down the hall and into the dark night.

In fact, I think I hear footsteps right now...

AFTERWORD -OR- IN WHICH ALL IS REVEALED ALONG WITH A STERN LECTURE

WE ARE ALL THE I OF THE STORY. THE FACELESS CREATURE IS OUR GOVERNMENT. INTENTIONALITY REPRESENTS THE MECHANISMS OF POWER WHICH HAVE BEEN TAKEN FROM US. THE NURSES IN THE STORY ARE EVERY SINGLE AMERICAN WHO WORKS TOO HARD AND SACRIFICES TOO MUCH TO ALLOW THEMSELVES TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE CULPABLE IN THE MURDER OF TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN THEIR LIFETIME. AFTER ALL, WE PAID FOR IT.

LOVE THE PLACE YOU LIVE, YOUR FAMILY, YOUR NEIGHBORS, THE OTHER PEOPLE WHO LIKE YOU ARE JUST LIVING THE BEST THEY CAN, FOR THESE PEOPLE ARE TRULY AMERICA. BUT FEAR A GOVERNMENT THAT IS BEYOND OUR CONTROL, A SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY/TRAGEDY THAT IS DOWN RIGHT DEPRESSINGLY COMMON.

PEOPLE WHO DONT THINK IT CAN HAPPEN HERE ARE ONLY HARMING THEMSELVES. WE CANNOT RULE THE WORLD WITH MISSLES AND TANKS, AND WHETHER YOU WANT TO FACE THE FACT OR NOT, THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE DOING. WE ARE, IN SHORT, THE VERY BAD GUYS WE ROOT AGAINST IN THE MOVIES.

WE CAN HELP THOSE WHO ASK. WE CAN ACT LIKE GOOD ROLE MODELS. WE CAN LIVE UP TO 10 % OF OUR RHETORICAL FREEDOM, AND CONTINUE AIMING FOR MORE. MOST OF ALL, WE CAN SHARE.

WITHOUT INTENTIONALITY, WE ARE MORALLY FILTHY AND POWERLESS TO CLEANSE OURSELVES.

THIS HAS BEEN A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT BROUGHT TO YOU BY YOUR CONSCIENCE.