

Seeing things that no one else can see

He shows me a ceramic ram, duck, and eagle: “At night I see them wrestling with each other.”

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He's sitting in his chair when I arrive. That's it. Just sitting. Not watching TV, not reading. Just vacantly staring up at the ceiling. The curtains are drawn and the window closed, even though outside it's a pleasant October day. The air is stale, sad, heavy.

He doesn't hear my knock on the door. He looks at me quizzically when I walk in, then a smile gradually grows over his face as he recognizes who I am. At least I think he does. I'm never quite sure. He struggles to sit up straight. Everything is slow. Everything hurts.

“How’s it going?” I ask him. It instantly seems a stupid question, particularly in a place like this. I know precisely how it’s going, which is to say, not particularly well. I know that he’s lonely, that he’s in near-constant physical pain, that he’s lonely, that he’s confused and disoriented, that he’s lonely, that the food isn’t what he would like it to be, that he’s lonely, that he misses friends who have died, that he’s lonely, that he wonders why he can’t be with his wife. ... Also, that he’s lonely.

He looks up at me and says with a raspy and strained voice, “It’s really terrible, this life. But I guess we gotta get through it.”

He smiles and tugs on his eyebrow. He has been doing this since I arrived.

We drift around the edges of conversation. Sentences start but don’t finish. Thoughts float around but never really land. We talk of old days, old friends, of better times. The light in his eyes flickers. We sit in silence, waiting for something, anything to break it.

“I see things that nobody else can see,” he suddenly says. He points to the top of a cupboard where a ceramic ram sits beside a duck and an eagle. “Everyone tells me that those animals don’t move, but I see them running around all the time. They come down at night and I see them wrestling with each other. But nobody else can see this.” He sighs somewhat plaintively or impatiently—as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, but he can’t really make me understand.

I look up at the ornamental animals, willing them to move, to wrestle, to wreak a bit of blessed havoc for the sake of this dear old soul. They remain obstinately, irritatingly still.

I think of Genesis 32 and Jacob wrestling with his mysterious night visitor, of emerging from a night of madness with a limp and a new name, of refusing to let his adversary go until he received a blessing. I think of the many hurting souls in sad and lonely places who see things that most of us can’t see, don’t want to see, refuse to see. I think of those who wrestle with things seen and unseen, who struggle with God.

I pray for my friend. Some things I pray out loud—that God would ease his pain and his unsettled mind, that he would experience love and comfort, that kindness and grace would soothe his troubled days. Other things I pray in the quiet of my own mind—that he wouldn’t give up wrestling until he wrenches a blessing from the hand

of God.

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