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Blind Spot

The small, circular, optically insensitive region in the retina where fibers of the optic nerve emerge from the eyeball. It has no rods or cones. A subject about which one is markedly ignorant or prejudicial.

BLINDNESS WAS MY father's blind spot, and it became my family's and mine, the word we didn't dare say. In our house there was no gentle, businesslike dog, no white cane, no Braille playing cards or talking books. Rather than accepting and adapting to his blindness, my father, Dennis Faulkner, hoped and prayed for a cure—though less and less as the years went by—and walked a step behind my mother, an unobtrusive hand on her arm. In the early days, he made a game of not being able to see. Because there were seven kids in our family, he often dressed my little sisters. His hands were gentle with them as he held them one by one between his knees and pulled on panties, long stockings, and high white shoes. He couldn't see which shoe fit which foot, but he always made a

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game of it. “Right-er-left-er-left-er-right?” he’d ask. They’d giggle with delighted superiority and set him straight.

Somewhere along the way, the games and laughter ended, and instead of jokes about blindness, we silently agreed on denial, learning vigilance to help preserve his illusion. We whisked obstacles—the dog, little kids, footstools—out of his way and put cups and tools into his hands, so he wouldn’t have to ask or grope. One Sunday when the nine of us were walking from the car up the steps to St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, a woman who obviously knew us asked me, “Is your daddy blind?”

Feeling as if she had insulted him or accused him of something obscene, I said indignantly, “No, he just can’t see too well.” All through grade school, high school, and college, I never told a single soul outside my family that I had a blind father, protecting his secret as closely as if he were a gangster or an excon.

Because I lost my father when I was too young to know him, I can only guess why blindness became our secret. I left home at eighteen, fleeing Mandan, North Dakota, my dead little hometown. The college my five sisters, my brother, and I attended was four hundred miles from home, and I had only enough money to go home at Christmas and in the summer. By then, my dad was aging and growing more and more silent. I loved him, but it never occurred to me to be interested in him as a person beyond the one I knew and the earlier one revealed in the stories I’d heard a few times too often.

Then I joined a Benedictine monastery and left him even further behind. As I look now at the stiff, silly letters I wrote home those early years of my monastic life, I realize that I must have found it impossible to bridge the gap between my simple home and the world of prayer, study, and constant cleaning that comprised my first couple of years in the monastery. Once my mother sent me

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a bag of carrots from her garden, with the dirt still on them. At home, I always ate them that way, straight from the garden, brushing the dirt off on my jeans. But the other novices were getting huge boxes of Fanny Farmer chocolates from their families. I hid my carrots and eventually threw them away. With my mother, I was lucky that she lived past my years of self-absorption and shame and that I chanced upon Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, and many other working-class feminist writers who helped me see her and her hard-working life in a new light. By the time she died in 1993, I understood her and admired her for a hundred reasons.

My father had no such chance at redemption. He died when I was twenty-five, and my grief for him was buried beneath the stony silence of the novitiate. Shortly after he died, my mother wrote with rare directness, “I know you lost your favorite person.” She was right. But in the years that followed, as my mother flourished in reality and in my estimation, my father diminished to a broken shadow who appeared only once in my dreams—an old, thin man in his faded blue sweater, lying on his side, silent, blind, with his big strong hands helpless and useless between his knees. Have you come, old man, I wondered, to lead me after you, cursing, into the darkness?

In doing research on Tillie Olsen, I learned another lesson: smarts and a flair for language come from somewhere. I came to hate the idea of isolated genius, the *onlys*, the woman writer “imprisoned in uniqueness,” as Germaine Greer describes it, and to look for visible or invisible evidence of influence and support for the women writers I was studying. It recently occurred to me to look for such evidence in my own history.

So I began this search almost out of curiosity. My five sisters, my brother, and I all have the ability, seemingly untaught, to feel the rhythm and swing of language, to delight in it, and to catch it on paper. Where did this ability come from? Not from our serviceable

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but unremarkable schools. Not from my mother. The weekly letters she wrote faithfully to her distant children were stream-of-thought sentences, sprawled on the page without much punctuation and with no literary grace. She wrote as associatively as she talked and almost never sat down to read a book.

After my mother died, I finally felt free to read the letters my father wrote to her toward the end of their long courtship. I expected to find there a wild flair for language and a skill like ours. For wasn't our father a great storyteller, and hadn't he recommended Zane Grey's Western romances, which my sisters and I carried home by the bushful from the public library and read through the long summer days? What I found in those letters, written in a crabbed hand on cheap little tablet pages, is not graceful. The letters are inarticulate, filled with clichés and commonplaces, misspelled words and odd punctuation, words spelled the way the Irish say them (*lave* for *leave*, for instance), and his distress that he couldn't put into written words what he felt for the little blond sweetheart he was courting. Dennis Faulkner (even his name had several spellings—Dennis, Denis, Den) was not a man of the pen; he had none of the linguistic skill of a James Joyce or a Frank O'Connor, nor even of a Louis L'Amour. I was so disappointed in those letters it took me another six years to learn some of what they have to tell me. I won't plunder them for my own uses; they are too personal, too intimate, the long love song of a forty-two-year-old man who sees his last chance of happiness being squeezed to death by poverty and by the post-Depression economy of the late 1930s in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Those letters didn't solve the mystery of my literary heritage, but they showed me another connection between my father and me and brought to light the deeper mystery of his blindness. I was two years old when my father wrote his only letter to me. My mother, my older sister Judy, one-year-old Jeanne, and I had gone by train from

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Mandan to Sauk Centre, Minnesota, to visit my mother's family. It was the first time she'd been back since she and Dennis got married in 1937 and headed west, all their belongings and an out-of-work brother-in-law packed into my dad's truck. During the weeks we were in Minnesota, Dennis wrote two letters to us. One of them began, "Dear Judy and Margie, This is the first time I have the pleasure of writing to my girls." But then the letters stopped. My father never wrote to me again. He never wrote to anyone again. By the time I was five, he was legally blind, unable to drive our Model-A even on the deserted roads around Mandan where he wouldn't meet any traffic except the odd milk truck or hay wagon.

But he had had an earlier life, recorded in the stories he told and the letters he wrote my mother. Those letters are the words of a man who lived by his wits, his strong back, and his eyes. By the time I knew him well, his eyes were all but gone, and his blindness had become the central fact of our lives. Blindness made him think we were endangered, a covey of small girls and a boy on the flat North Dakota prairies. He kept us marooned as he was marooned, trying to guard us from predators and growing, over the years, dark and silent.

People deal with blindness in many ways, and, as I've said, my dad's way was denial, for reasons I've lately begun to probe. Maybe my father's refusal to be and act blind was his protection against the narrow world seeing people imagined for the blind in the forties and fifties, the occupations they trained them for (chair caning, rug making), and the low aspirations they counseled. Maybe he wouldn't accept the vast contrast between what his life had been and what it was fast becoming. He had climbed Mt. Rainier, ridden raw-broken horses, danced till dawn, and then worked a full day threshing grain. Now he should shuffle along with a white cane as conspicuous and bony as an old woman's finger? He might as

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well sit on the street corner peddling pencils. “You can become anything you want,” he told us, and, “Your daddy isn’t afraid of anything.” In the face of his desperate courage, how could we name the onrushing darkness?

I have seen this blind spot affect my mother and each of us seven kids in a different way. I think we all became a little ashamed, a little more convinced that we were different from most people and not quite normal or respectable. Twice my brother set the hay field near our house on fire, bringing the fire trucks screaming out from town. Lots of boys start fires, and maybe he was just a boy with matches in his pocket and those tempting dry fields; or maybe those near disasters were his flamboyant protest against blindness and the secretiveness that made our lives darker still.

For myself, this secretiveness helped make me a watcher, reading the Braille of bodies, and then a poet, suspicious of surfaces. For if our family hid so momentous a secret from outside eyes, what about all the lives, all the families around us?

I’ve known the physical facts of my dad’s blindness all my life, but because he and I couldn’t talk about it, I’ve had to guess at or imagine the emotional and psychological consequences. What did the physical facts mean, and how did they shape and twist my father’s life? How can I know? Through observation and imagination and sympathy, through the knowledge research has given me, and, most recently, through my experience of oncoming blindness. For the blind gene is in me, too, and sooner or later the brightness I see today will fade to gray, then black.

I’ve read that some people who are born blind and then receive sight are cruelly disappointed by the tattered world that is nowhere near as beautiful as the one they carry in their minds. Dennis Faulkner wasn’t born blind; nor did he become blind suddenly, as the result of sickness or an accident. For him there was always

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dread and always a cruel hope. Along with extreme nearsightedness, he had an inherited disease called “retinitis pigmentosa,” a group of diseases that cause the photoreceptor cells in the retina—the rods and cones—to degenerate and eventually die. Because of the name, I used to imagine sullen patches of pigment migrating onto the retina, like green scum moving in from the edge of a pond in the dog days of late August. In reality, the pigmentation is a normal part of the retina. In healthy eyes, an enzyme trims away the pigment; in the eyes of people with RP the enzyme is missing or defective, so the pigment stays put, gradually destroying the cells and narrowing vision on the top, bottom, and sides. Eventually the person is looking out through two tunnels at the milky shapes moving from darkness into darkness. *Light at the end of the tunnel* is a hopeful phrase, promising brighter days ahead, but for the person with RP, tunnels are treacherous and terrifying. He can’t trust the air to part magically before him or the ground to lie solid and comforting underfoot. Sidewalks fold and ripple, tripping him. Open cupboard doors leave bruises. Because night blindness usually accompanies RP, my father probably never saw a star. Other dear scenes and faces gradually faded, until all he had was the memory of his children’s faces on adolescents and young adults. Researchers haven’t determined the exact genetic pathway RP follows in our extended family, and, in fact, we may have inherited two different strains of the disease. While there are exceptions in our family, the general pattern is that fathers pass the disease on to their daughters, most of whom become carriers; the daughters may or may not develop the disease. The daughters can pass the disease on to their sons, with each conception a fifty-fifty flip of the coin; their daughters can also be carriers.

The clichés about blindness, invented to console people for having sight, are partially true at best. I’ve heard it said hundreds of

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times that the other senses become keener to compensate for the loss of vision. It's true that my father's ears told him by footstep and voice which one of hundreds of customers had walked into our grocery store and said, "Hello, Faulkner." He played music by ear, on the harmonica, willow whistles, his hands, spoons. He knew meadowlarks and taught us to hear and love their song, knew approaching weather from the sound of the wind and the feel of it on his face. He knew what ailed our 1938 Plymouth from the cough in its motor, and he knew how to fix it. His body and his hands, big, rough, always bruised, became a sea of eyes. Balancing on a one-legged stool, he milked Buttercup, our Jersey cow, his cheek against her warm tan side, milk zinging smartly into the galvanized aluminum pail, the melody changing as the rich milk reached the top. Milking was entirely a matter of feel and rhythm, as was harnessing the big work horses, Ted and Dolly, and hitching them to the plow. But how do you plow a straight furrow if you have no fixed point to help you navigate?

In our image-saturated culture, most of us would do well to close our eyes and call our other senses to life. For all of us, the other senses stir out of their sluggishness when the need arises, guiding us down a black hallway or haltingly down the stairs. But this momentary compensation makes most of us doubly grateful for sight; we realize that for most blind people, blindness is a loss, a lack, the absence of something essential. We have a hard time believing those who call blindness a gift.

But blindness is much more than a matter of physical danger or incapacities.

What is it like to have only footsteps and the thin music of voices? How does dependence, even on loved ones, twist you, making you always angry, a smoldering peat fire easily stirred to flame that blinds your children to your tenderness? What is it like

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not to be able to see the face of your wife or child crumple in pain when you lash out; not to know if faces are looking at you with pity or amusement, contempt or love; not to see rolled eyes, conspiratorial glances, boredom? What dangers lurk underfoot or to each side, and who's waiting to cheat the old blind guy out of his money, his wife, his kids?

I started working in our grocery store/vegetable market when I was about nine, smart enough to add numbers and make change but no match for two fast-talking con artists. They bought some trifle, then asked me to change a big bill. My dad listened suspiciously, following the transaction in his mind. They left, laughing no doubt, and dad counted the money in the till. We were, as he had suspected, twenty dollars short, a day's profit in 1949.

Dennis was never a man to cater to other people's tastes or opinions. He didn't know or care much about propriety, so even if he hadn't been blind, I doubt that he would have arranged his face to please those around him. But his letters and tender memories show me that he would have worked hard to please the people he loved, that he wouldn't deliberately have hurt them, that the pain on their faces would have been reflected on his. When I was very young, he could still see his children's faces and know if they were sad, happy, or in pain. I often felt loved, held by the tender look on his face and by his velvet voice. I doubt that my youngest sister ever saw that look. By the time she was born, in 1953, my father's eyesight was almost gone. Monie was a blurry shape even when he held her close—soft, warm, with springy curls he could feel, but not with features he could see, find himself in, shape his face to.

After many years of not seeing himself reflected in mirrors, windows, and other faces, I think my dad became invisible to himself. He didn't remember to control the twitches, the bald gestures, the

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waves of thought and emotion breaking through to the surface. His naked face freed other people to be as thoughtlessly rude as children, who will gaze with fixed, open curiosity at physical disabilities. I watched normally guarded adults watching him, and hated them for their quizzical looks. If he'd been in a wheelchair like President Roosevelt or had had a hook hand or a beautiful red birthmark staining his face, they would have glanced quickly and looked away in embarrassment and compassion. But at my dad with his empty eyes they could look their fill.

By the time I left home for good, Dad often stood at the windows of our grimy little store, staring into the darkness at all hours of the day, his face bitter. He cursed under his breath, not the exuberant, inventive workingman's curses of his earlier years but a bleak, dreary goddamning of his whole life.

Because blindness was an almost untouchable subject in our family, I needed to turn it over in my hands like a family heirloom and do what I've always done: look to the wisdom of the language itself to see what it could teach me about my father's life, my family's life, and mine. I began with the deepest root.

It was a dazzling surprise to find that the Indo-European root of *blind*, thousands of years old, apparently means the opposite, its family as varied and colorful as my mother's flowerbeds. That root—*bhel*—means “to shine, flash, burn; shining white and various bright colors.” *Bhel* bears on its branches *beluga* and *blush*, as well as *blue* and *flamingo*. It has a branch for *blond*, like my mother and sisters, their pale hair gleaming among the dark-haired German Russians and Bohemians in our hometown. This linguistic tree is a *flamboyant*, so called in Haiti for its blazing umbrella of red-orange blooms. It is a *conflagration* that burns all this brilliance to black, for it bears on one twig the Germanic *blakaz*, “burned”; on another, the old High German *blende*, “to blind, deceive”; and

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on a third, the Old English *blind*, then as now, verb, noun, adjective, and adverb. The root and trunk of this linguistic tree suggest that there is as much light as there is darkness in being blind.

But the Old English 'blind' apparently fell far from the trunk of its Indo-European tree. In its definitions, synonyms, connotations, and compound forms, there is no color, no refulgence or flamboyance, no playfulness, life, or growth. In the constellation of words surrounding it in the 1992 edition of Roget's *International Thesaurus*, there are only black holes whose inexorable gravity extinguishes all light. In blindness, or so the conventions of the English language say, there is neither light nor germinating darkness. To be blind is to be *closed, drunk, undiscerning, insensible, unaware, unpersuadable, stupid, or reckless*; a *blinder* is a pretext, a trick; someone wearing *blinders* is narrow-minded, a *blind story* has no point, and a *blind hedge* has no openings or passages for light.

This linguistic family tree and especially the metaphorical meanings 'blindness' has accumulated over the centuries made me realize that I needed to learn not only about physical blindness but also about all the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual conditions we call by that name. Some of them afflicted my dad; others he resisted. Still others were an unquestioned part of his world. Elizabeth Kelly, my dad's maternal grandmother, brought retinitis pigmentosa with her from Ireland in the steerage compartment of an emigrant ship. That gene or combination of genes has wormed its way silently through the next six generations of our family. I think there's also a communal DNA that follows a twisting path from generation to generation. It manifests itself in our thoughts and actions and our subconscious selves, as well as in family and social patterns. I no longer think it's possible to tell the story of a person or a family without also describing what the Italian cultural theorist Antonio

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Gramsci calls the “infinity of traces” history leaves on the psyche of every one of us. As Gramsci says, “It is imperative at the outset to compile . . . an inventory” of history’s traces. For my dad wasn’t only or even primarily a blind man. For starters, he was a working-class, first-generation Irish American, living in North Dakota in the middle of the twentieth century, a Catholic, a Democrat, a father of six daughters and a son, with each of these historical facts leaving traces on his life. I agree with William Zinsser’s assertion in *Inventing the Truth* that “a good memoir is also a work of history, catching a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society.” I would go further. Good memoirs tell the story of the worlds in which the individual or familial life unfolded and then critique those worlds and their hidden assumptions.

To get to know my father’s world I turned to a useful book, *The Chronicle of America*, on the recommendation of poet and memoirist Carolyn Forché. In a memoir writing workshop, she asked us to research the time and place in which our slice of story occurred. I thought this was merely practical advice to help us find historically and geographically authentic details: Who was secretary of state? What songs played incessantly on car radios? What was Senator Joe McCarthy up to? But when I looked up the years 1945, 1947, and 1949, all of which were important to my father’s story, I found much more than historical window dressing. I discovered a huge world whose existence I knew about only vaguely or not at all. For instance, I learned that in 1945 hundreds of Japanese Americans were interned at Fort Lincoln, just ten miles east of Mandan. Nineteen forty-seven was the hundredth anniversary of Black ’47, the worst year of the Great Famine in Ireland, a disaster all four of my Irish great-grandparents survived. The discoveries kept coming. In 1949 the U.S. government offered the three Indian tribes of Fort Berthold Reservation in northwest North Dakota a few fistfuls of money in exchange for thousands of acres of rich

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river bottomland. It was an offer they were not free to refuse. In that year, the construction of the Garrison Dam began; when it was completed it would prevent the Missouri River from flooding people like my family who lived downstream. I found other worlds that intersected with ours: the world of the few black people who came into our grocery store in pre-civil rights United States; the world of visually impaired and otherwise disabled people; the world of the Catholic Church of the 1940s and '50s; the patriarchal world with its spoken and unspoken dictates.

So, I set out to trace those big worlds, well aware that historical accounts, too, are full of blind spots, whole blank areas drowned out by the floods of imperialism, colonization, and willed forgetting. Yet part of the work of the memoir is to rescue crucial events from such innocent or deliberate forgetting. As we all know, memory is not made of whole cloth. Gaps in my memory of my dad's life led me to long conversations with my sisters and brother; gaps in history, the story memoirist Patricia Hampl calls "communal memoir," led me to search out immigration records, geography, popular culture, and religion, and to visit museums, graveyards, archives, the old home place. If we didn't know it before, the twentieth century has taught us that nations and ethnic groups, like families, can conspire to forget or deny harsh and ambiguous realities so fiercely that the agreed-upon story, the communal memoir, is either much better or much worse than the real events. That incomplete, distorted, glossed over, romanticized story becomes everyone's memory, the one we print in our history books and pass on to our children. It takes considerable searching, then, to unearth and tell a more complex and often more painful version. Still, as honest scholars admit, some information is lost forever. I hope the gaps and holes in my account will pull others into the conversation—in agreement, disagreement, correction, expansion—as I explore blindness in its many physical and cultural permutations.