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was grasping at me; I had a sense it was grasping all of us. I was being swept up by a breezy, harmonious wave of major chords struck with pep. Then, after a weird, underwater period where I thought I might faint, my head cleared, and I understood what was happening.

A melody issued from Liv's organ, a melody effusive and irrepressible. It was contagious. It was sweet. It was Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Happy Talk," from the musical *South Pacific*, and I was belting it out. A rich, dulcet tenor sprang from my throat as helplessly I found myself constructing the musical question: *You've got to have a dream! If you don't have a dream! How you gonna have a dream come true?* My mind filled with all the Carpenters songs I had loved and I thought of how I always tried, as a boy singing in the shower, to get my vowels to sound as velvety and overstuffed as Karen Carpenter's did. I couldn't help it then; a tide of pent-up joy washed over me. It was uncontrollable, it was uncool and wrong, and I was so happy. I was so happy I felt sick. It was as though all the loathing and resentment I'd been nursing at least since I was a sophomore in high school had burst like a soap bubble, had been popped and defused and dried out, and all that was left inside me was a lather of pure euphoria. I was so happy I thought I might melt.

We were of the light, bedazzling all. Liv arched over her synthesizer, singing, while the Swedes strummed joyfully along. Anders banged out sweet, chiming chords on his guitar, an expression of blank rapture on his face. Max was laughing and bobbing from his knees. We were making something lovely. Together we praised the power of creation. Below, our fans stared, openmouthed with horror. Liv lifted her fingers from the keyboard and began to do the happy talkie dance with both hands.



Binocular Vision

EDITH PEARLMAN

For his fortieth birthday my father was given a pair of binoculars. His medical colleagues teamed up on the present. He was neither a bird-watcher nor a sports fan, so the glasses just lay on his dresser like a trophy.

They didn't tempt me at first. I had already been disappointed by his ophthalmoscope, which didn't magnify a thing. (I also didn't like the coin-operated telescope on our Connecticut city's twenty-four-story building, the tallest in New England; as soon as I managed to focus on something through the telescope, my nickel ran out.) But one December afternoon, wandering in an aimless, childish way around my parents' bedroom, I picked up the binoculars, took them to a window that looked out on the street, and directed them toward a leafless tree. I saw a

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brown blur, so I fiddled with the wheels on the instrument. Now the tree was hyper-clear, making my eyes ache. Finally, after more fiddling, I saw the tree plain and even vaguely menacing, like my great-uncle at the last family party who had leaned so close to me that his tie swayed in front of my eyes. But when I thoughtlessly reached out to touch the tree's bark, I touched instead the windowpane.

The side window in my parents' room, like the windows of the other bedrooms in our end-of-the-row house, looked out at the second-floor apartment next door, also brick, where the Simons lived.

With the aid of the binoculars, I projected myself into the Simons' living room. Their fireplace was as dark as a cave. On the mantel crouched a humpbacked clock. In one of the two chairs flanking the hearth sat Mrs. Simon herself, her gray head bent. She was crocheting. I could not see the pattern of the work, nor the pattern on her dress, but I could see that her green chair wore a lace antimacassar and that a flared lamp on a table cast its glow on a pile of magazines. There was no television, of course—only rich show-offs had televisions then.

I went into my own bedroom. From there I inspected the Simons' dining room. An empty silver bowl occupied pride of place on the table. Perhaps Mr. Simon's colleagues had given it to him when *he* turned forty. I went into my sister's bedroom. From her window I peered at the Simons' little kitchen. Two cups and two saucers lay on the drainboard. A calendar hung on the wall, but no matter how much I fiddled with the wheels of the binoculars I could not make out the Simons' appointments.

From our last bedroom, reserved for guests, I got a dark glimpse of the Simons' big bedroom. I knew there was a small bedroom, too, for my friend Elaine lived in an identical apartment down the street. The small bedroom faced the backyard, a skimpy strip of grass and six little garages, one each for the six apartments. I would never get to see that bedroom. The room I did see had a double bed with an afghan at its foot, folded into a perfect right triangle. This application of geometry to daily life gratified my critical ten-year-old self.

During that month, which included a school vacation, I discovered that Mrs. Simon was a great tidier. Often I would find her in the living room, readjusting an antimacassar or rearranging candy in a dish or polishing the glass door of the bookcase. Serious cleaning was done once a week by a regal mulatto woman, but sometimes Mrs. Simon would stand at the kitchen sink, her stubborn profile lowered, fiercely scrubbing something. Occasionally she lay down in the bedroom. And often she disappeared. Perhaps she was talking on the telephone in the hall, a windowless place my binoculars could not penetrate. Or perhaps she was walking a few blocks to Elm Street, as most of the women in our neighborhood did most days, in order to pick up some fish and

vegetables, or a library book. Once in a while I ran into Mrs. Simon on just such an errand. We were the same height—I was a tall child and she a small and somewhat bent woman—and her expression was as steely as her curls. Our eyes met, with no mediating binoculars. "Hello," I'd whisper, suddenly shy. She never answered.

In the late afternoons, Mrs. Simon got busy. She stirred pots on the stove. She set the table in the dining room. She folded the evening paper several times, this way and that, and finally laid it on the arm of Mr. Simon's chair. Again she adjusted the antimacassars and arranged the candies.

Darkness came at 4:30. From the window of our spare bedroom, reading by flashlight, I kept track of the cars returning to the six garages. A floodlight illuminated the area. When Mr. Simon's car appeared, I would close my book, switch off my flashlight, and raise my binoculars.

Mr. Simon, a tall man, would unfold from his automobile. He'd pass a hand over his gray hair, raise the door of the garage, get back into the car, and drive it into the garage. He usually sat there for a while, giving me a chance to inspect his license plate, which had three numbers and two letters. I have forgotten them all. My eyes caressed the curve of his car trunk. I noticed the branch caught on the fender. Where had he been driving, to collect such a trophy? Was he a salesman? What did he do while Mrs. Simon and I were watching the clock for him?

In the midst of my musings, Mr. Simon would reappear, briefcase in hand, and roll down his garage door. That handkerchief, hanging from his overcoat pocket—might it slip out? Would the drop of the handkerchief be marked only by me, whose presence was as undetectable as God's? And if I alone saw cloth meet asphalt, could the handkerchief really be said to have fallen, or would it be like the tree I'd learned about in class, the tree that cracks unheard in the forest and thus provides a philosophical question for the ages? Surely Mrs. Simon, who sorted her laundry with as much finickiness as a forty-niner panning for gold, would notice a missing item. But the handkerchief clung to his pocket as Mr. Simon walked slowly across the backyard and toward the rear door of the apartment building.

I glided into my parents' dark bedroom. My mother was duplicating Mrs. Simon's activities in our kitchen downstairs, my father was saving people's vision in his office. I turned my magic glasses onto the Simons' bright living room, only a few yards away.

How I yearned to witness Mr. Simon's return. Alas, it always took place in that inner hall. It must be like my father's homecoming: the woman hurrying to the door; the man bringing in a gust of weather and excitement; the hug, affectionate and sometimes annoyingly long; and finally the separation, so that two little girls rushing downstairs could be caught in those overcoated arms. But at the Simons' there were no children. Perhaps the pair exchanged a dignified kiss.

Our dinner coincided with theirs. And then I had to help my mother with the dishes. It wasn't until evening that I saw the Simons again.

This was my favorite scene. The couple by the fireplace and the invisible guest. I could see how motionless Mr. Simon's long face was as he read the paper, page by slow page, and how stiffly he held his shoulders under the jacket he never took off. I could almost hear the tick of the mantelpiece clock.

I shifted my attention to Mrs. Simon. Cross and cross again went the needles. And up and down, up and down went the active lips, the unstoppable mouth, the mouth that never produced a word for me but spoke so easily and swiftly and continually when the beloved was home. Talking. Laughing. Talking again.

After vacation I visited the Simons less often. By the end of January I was dropping in only occasionally—for a moment at the end of an afternoon, say, to make sure that something was cooking on the stove.

Then, during breakfast one February morning, two policemen appeared at our back door. "Doctor, can you...?" My father did not pause even to put on his suit jacket; he just followed the sturdy officers into the yard, looking like their servant in his silk-backed waistcoat and his white shirtsleeves. They walked across the crusted snow and into the backyard of the apartment building next door. My mother stood at the kitchen window, her hand on her heart.

My father returned before we left for school. "It's Al Simon," he said to my mother. "He died during the night."

My sister continued to buckle her boots.

"Was he murdered?" I said.

"No," my father said. "What makes you ask?"

"The policemen."

My father sighed. Then, after a thoughtful pause, "Mr. Simon committed suicide," he told me. "In his car."

"Did he drive it off a cliff?"

My parents exchanged frowns and shrugs. Such a child, their looks said, all curiosity and no sympathy—and this the teachers call gifted? Then, still in a patient voice, my father explained that Mr. Simon had driven into his garage, closed the door from inside, stuffed the cracks with newspapers, reentered his car, and turned on the motor.

The next day in the obituary section I could find no hint of suicide, unless *suddenly* was the code word. But the final sentence was a shocker. "Mr. Simon, a bachelor, is survived by his mother."

I raced to my own mother. "I thought she was his wife!"

"So did she," my mother said, admitting me abruptly into the complicated world of adults, making me understand what I had until then only seen.