



The Towers Of St. Michael's
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The Towers Of St. Michael's

Paul watched Bartalan Varga slash egg-yellow paint across his canvas, adding a sparkle of reflected sunlight to a traffic scene from his native Budapest. On Paul's fMRI screen, Bartalan's visual cortex lit up, just as if he were seeing the colorful buildings and buses and pedestrians in his painting. But even a cursory glance at the stunted buds where his eyes should have been contradicted this. Bartalan Varga was totally blind.

Paul wished Felicia could be here to see it. Two years ago, she would have been. She used to study the brain scans just as eagerly as he did, and at home in bed they discussed the day's problems long into the night. She would have asked the same questions: How did he do it? How could a man blind from birth understand color, shading, depth, and perspective, and reproduce it on a canvas better than the cognitive neurologists in the lab?

But she wasn't here. So Paul had to ask the questions himself.

"Those arches," he said, pointing to two stone towers rising resolutely from the rubble of a cathedral. "How do you know how the shadows fall?"

He waited while their translator—a grad student at the university—repeated the question in Hungarian and relayed Bartalan's reply.

"He says, 'I hear them.'"

Paul raised an eyebrow. "He hears shadows?"

"That's what he said."

"Are you sure you translated it right?"

The grad student crossed her arms.

"Sorry. Ask him how he can 'hear' shadows."

She complied and translated the response. "He says, 'Why do you call this the Red Room when the walls are painted white?'"

Paul traded glances with his assistant, Rajesh Singh, who shrugged. They called it the Red Room because of the red overhead lights - currently turned off - which they used when experimenting with lasers. Part of their research focused on finding a laser solution to the computer screen miniaturization problem. If personal computers could beam their output directly into the viewer's eyes, they could be as small as a wrist-watch, or even a pair of glasses, without trading visual workspace.

"Ask him," said Paul, "how he could possibly know that the room is painted white."

The grad student started to translate, but Bartalan Varga grimaced and waved her away. He turned to Paul and said slowly, with a heavy accent, "White smell different."

Later, while washing his hands with Rajesh in the restroom, Paul confessed his astonishment. "Honestly," he said, "I wouldn't believe this guy was blind if we hadn't tested him for light response. It's like magic."

"What was that he said toward the end?" said Rajesh. "White smells different?"

"He was hard to understand," said Paul. "Didn't sound like much of an explanation, anyway."

"White reflects more light than red," said Rajesh. "Maybe the heat from sunlight through the window is greater when the walls are white."

Paul cocked an eyebrow at him.

Rajesh shrugged. "Okay, I don't know. So it's a mystery. When you get home, thank Felicia for recommending this guy. How does she know him?"

"She met him on SightLink. It's like an online community for the blind."

"I haven't seen her in months—not since she left here. How is she?"

Paul put on the broad smile he always used when talking about his wife. "Oh, she's great. Really amazing. She teaches more classes at Harvard now that she did here before the accident."

"When's she going to stop by?"

"She wants to. I'm sure she will soon. She's just so busy."

"Well, tell her she's missed."

"I will."

Felicia stood at the butcher's block island in complete darkness, chopping onions. Paul switched on the light. Sliced olives, green

peppers, and mushrooms lay in neat piles in front of her. On the stove, a saucepan sizzled. He draped his coat over a chair, then bent and kissed her.

"Don't you dare leave that there," she said.

"Sorry."

Paul picked up his coat, retreated to the hall, and hung the coat in its assigned place in the closet. To safely navigate their home, Felicia required everything to be precisely placed: chairs pushed in, clothes stacked by color, food in the refrigerator and pantry arranged alphabetically. Before her accident, they'd lived in a mutually comfortable clutter, but that, like many things, had changed. It didn't bother him most of the time. He just had to remind himself that he wasn't the one contending with blindness.

"Your friend Bartalan was in the lab today," he said.

"Was he? How did it go?"

"Fantastic. Really astonishing what he can do—it's overturning our understanding of neural plasticity."

"I'm glad."

"He'll be here all week. You should come visit."

Felicia didn't answer right away. Then she said, "We'll see."

"Rajesh asked about you."

"Did he?"

"Yes. He wonders why you never stop by."

Her knife thunked heavily into the wood with each cut. Paul waited, but she didn't respond.

He allowed his frustration to show on his face, knowing she couldn't see it. She just didn't seem to care anymore. For years, they'd worked twelve-hour days side-by-side in the lab, doing the same research. It was their life; it was what they talked about. Then, late on a Friday night almost a year ago, she'd tuned the megawatt setting on a laser too high, and flashed away both retinas in an instant. Now, although her blindness could have opened new opportunities for her research, she'd rejected it entirely. Though he knew it wasn't true, it felt like she'd rejected him, too.

They ate their omelets in silence. Paul wanted to make conversation, but all he could think to talk about was the way Bartalan's visual cortex had lit up when he was painting. Paul had always thought the expression "the mind's eye" to be metaphor only - there was no internal screen in the brain upon which people "saw" their imaginings. It was a figure of speech. Only now he wasn't so sure.

After dinner, he cleared away the plates and loaded the dishwasher. Felicia settled onto the couch with her SightLink apparatus. After attaching the fingertip sensors, she pulled the sensor sphere over her head and tightened the seals. The sphere was transparent - Paul could see her face - but it blocked the sounds and smells generated inside. She spread her fingers and began typing in the air, using a virtual keyboard which she could feel but which was not really there.

Paul dawdled in the kitchen, wiping down appliances that were already clean. Before her blindness, they'd often spent evenings doing jigsaw puzzles together, the more complex the better. They'd enjoyed movies and a few favorite television shows, but she couldn't do any of those things anymore, and for her sake, he'd given them up too. But what did that leave? He still wanted to spend time with her, but she always escaped into her sphere. After half an hour, he gave up and went down to the basement.

The basement housed his own Red Room—not as big as what they had in the lab, but stocked enough for real research. On a battered wooden desk, three rhodamine laser clusters trailed wires to a central computer. He tinkered for a while, his mind more on Felicia than on what he was doing. He just didn't understand her. Blindness had changed her, and he had to figure her out all over again.

When he finally quit for the night, Felicia was still immersed in SightLink. He kissed the sphere and left her there. Halfway up the stairs, though, he heard her voice, and returned to the living room to find her holding the sphere in her lap.

"I felt you walk by," she said. "Sorry - I stayed on longer than I intended."

"It doesn't matter."

She pulled him close and kissed him, slowly and carefully, like she used to do in their previous life.

"Come up to bed," he said.

"Soon. I'm in the middle of a conversation. Really, I'll be up soon."

In bed, Paul flipped through the latest Cognitive and Behavior Neurology journal. After twenty minutes passed with no sign of Felicia, he went to sleep.

To afford the SightLink apparatus after Felicia went blind, Paul sold both their cars and bought a ten-year-old Suzuki Bandit motorcycle for

two thousand dollars. Boston's handicap transport vans brought Felicia to and from Harvard, so only Paul needed a vehicle. In summer, he enjoyed the open-air drive, but Boston winters came cold and unforgiving. Even a ski mask and scarf couldn't block the piercing wind. Now that it was March, the cold was just starting to subside, but it gave way to a new inconvenience: rain. Water pelted him all down I-93 and Massachusetts Avenue. When he finally turned onto Harrison, his face stung, and he could hardly see. He dismounted and wheeled his bike forward, then stopped short. At the bottom of the steps, a man lay flat on his back, drenched by the rain. Paul dropped his bike and ran to him. It was Bartalan Varga. "Are you hurt?" Paul shouted through the downpour. He cursed himself for leaving a blind man without an escort. Felicia navigated Boston so well it hadn't even occurred to him.

Bartalan hoisted himself up to his elbows. "No. I am fine."

Paul hesitated, wondering if he should call an ambulance anyway, but Bartalan stood, apparently unharmed. They went inside together, shoes squeaking on the waxed floor, dry heat enveloping them. Paul slammed the double doors shut against the wind, muting the sound of the pounding rain.

"Thank you," said Bartalan. "I am fine."

Paul eyed him critically. "What were you doing in the rain?"

Bartalan shrugged. "Is beautiful."

"From in here, maybe. Outside, it's just wet and cold."

"Is ... like landscape. Different sound on street, on bush, on car, on ..."
He pantomimed revving a hand accelerator.

"Motorcycle."

"Yes. Motorcycle. When sun is shining, these things are not there. No bush. No motorcycle. But in the rain, I see. Bush, car, motorcycle, just like you."

Paul stared. A chill ran down his body that had nothing to do with his wet clothing. This was a clue, a piece of the puzzle of how the brain compensated for blindness. Bartalan could see in the rain. But how literally? Could he simply tell that there were bushes and cars? Or could he trace their outlines, identify their textures, track their movements? When a sighted man saw a piece of cloth, he could imagine what it would feel like—could feel it in his mind, without ever touching it. Was Bartalan doing the same, only with different senses?

Paul said, "Please stay inside. For my sake, if not for your own."

He left Bartalan with his ear and fingertips pressed to the window.

"Look at this," said Rajesh. A deep-level view of Bartalan's brain scan shone on his screen. The fMRI identified areas of increased blood flow, which meant increased mental activity. Rajesh pointed to a bright synapse connecting the thalamus to the visual cortex. He played the scan forward while another screen showed a video of Bartalan painting. The synapse flashed bright, then dark, bright, dark.

"It took me a while to make sense of these," said Rajesh.

"They don't correlate to his painting?"

"At first, they seem to precede his painting, as if he were preparing an image in his mind before committing it to canvas."

"But that's sensory input," said Paul. "It should be straight from the optic nerve. Why would there be input when he's not actually seeing?"

"It's not coming from his eyes. It's coming from his ears."

"What?"

"The flashes respond to vestibulocochlear stimuli. His visual cortex is accepting auditory input. And making sense of it."

"Do sighted people show this correlation?"

Rajesh shook his head. "I pulled out some old scans and took a look. Blind people are ten times more likely to show this pattern than sighted people."

Paul dropped heavily into a chair. "This could explain a lot of miracles."

"The myths of blind people with superhuman hearing?"

"Exactly. Their ears are unaffected—we assumed the blind just paid better attention to sounds because they couldn't rely on their sight. Maybe there's more to it after all."

Paul thought of Felicia, spending her evenings plugged into SightLink. In a world composed entirely of sound, smell, and touch, did she experience something like sight? Or was it totally different—something a sighted person couldn't imagine?

He arrived home after seven. Felicia sat curled on the couch, sealed away inside her sphere. Easing down next to her, Paul rested a hand on her knee. She pushed against him, acknowledging his presence, but her

fingers kept touching invisible things, and it was several minutes before she pulled off the sphere.

"You're back late," she said.

"We had a lot going on. We only have this week with Bartalan, and we made a significant discovery today."

"Did you eat dinner?"

"Rajesh and I ordered out Thai from Noodle Street." Paul pointed to her sphere. "Are you going to be in there all evening?"

He meant it as a simple question, but she took it as an accusation. "Did you have a better idea?"

"I thought maybe we could talk. I hardly see you anymore."

"That's not my fault."

Paul took a deep breath. He didn't want this to turn into a fight.

He said, "I miss you, Felicia."

"If you'd come home earlier ... "

He took her hand. "That's not what I mean. I'm wrapped up heart and soul in discovering the mysteries of the brain. You've moved on to other things. I understand that. I don't resent it—at least, I try not to. But I don't know how to relate to you anymore."

Even talking to her like this was hard. He wanted to make eye contact, to communicate by his expression and the intentness of his gaze, but her eyes shifted aimlessly, unfocused, as if she weren't paying attention. He was trying to reach her through a shell, and he couldn't break in, couldn't read her emotions.

"I love you," he said. "Tell me how to know you."

She touched his face, tracing fingertips over eyes and nose and lips. "I'm blind, Paul. I'm not the same person I was. I can't

get excited about your work when every mention of it reminds me of what I've lost."

"But you can connect with strangers? These people on SightLink must know you better than I do."

She nodded. "They're blind, too. They know what it's like."

"But I'm not blind. What can I do?"

She didn't answer for a long time. Then she said, "Close your eyes."

He did. She lifted his hand and touched it to her face. He traced eyes, nose, and lips, just as she had done.

“You’ve never seen me before,” she said. “You have no idea what I look like. Discover me.”

He worked slowly, exploring the shape of her jaw, the curves of her ears, her eyebrows, the indentation on her upper lip. He tried to build a picture in his mind from what he touched, but it was hard. He ran his fingers through her hair and around her neck. When he reached her collarbone, he discovered that she’d taken off her shirt.

After he had touched every inch of her skin, they made love. She fell asleep in his arms, while he lay awake, staring at the ceiling. What did this mean? He was glad for the intimacy—it meant she hadn’t given up on him. But what happened now? Should he quit his job? Or switch to the classroom instead of research, like she had done? He’d do it, if it would bridge the gap, but he didn’t think even that would be enough. He’d always believed that the way for her to connect with the world again was to learn to act as if she could see. Tonight, he’d connected with her when he had pretended to be blind.

In the morning, while Felicia still slept, Paul fitted the SightLink sensors over his own fingers and lifted the sphere over his head. Sure enough, he felt a keyboard in front of him - not solid enough to stop his fingers, but the illusion of touch was enough to find the home keys. With his eyes firmly shut, he logged in. A complex fugue of sounds and subtle odors overwhelmed him. He reached out with his fingers and felt something - different things - but nothing he could identify. Everything felt sharp, like clusters of toothpicks. For Felicia, this was like transportation - she experienced the illusion of being in another place, a place in which she could move and interact with others. For Paul, though, it was dead sensation, as if someone were poking his fingers and playing random sounds in his ears.

He remembered Bartalan in the rain. Did these sounds and sensations operate like the rain did to Bartalan - as non-visual input to his visual cortex? If Rajesh was right about the “blind” synapse, Paul might be physically unable to experience SightLink. Here, he would have to be blind before he could see. He disconnected and left for the university. He wanted to talk to Bartalan.

Paul found him alone in the Red Room, painting, the fMRI disconnected for now. His canvas showed the same picture as before: a city street

dominated by a ruined Baroque cathedral. Only two stone towers remained, topped by turquoise steeples and surrounded by rubble.

"How well do you know my wife?" Paul asked him.

Bartalan rolled his brush against the canvas, darkening the sky. "Is not happy," he said. "Does not ... accept."

"Accept? Accept her blindness, you mean?"

Lowering his brush, Bartalan swiveled to face him. "Something hold her back. You, maybe?"

"I don't want to hold her back," said Paul. "But I don't want to lose her, either."

Bartalan pointed to the painting. "Saint Michael's Church," he said.

Paul blinked at the change of subject. "What happened to it?" he asked. "Was it bombed?"

Bartalan nodded. "In World War Two."

"The Nazis bombed Budapest in World War Two? I didn't know that."

"No," said Bartalan. He smiled unpleasantly. "The Americans."

Paul stared at the ruined church. "What does this have to do with Felicia?"

"If you keep her," said Bartalan, "is always torn. Let her go, is happy. Is your choice."

"You think I should give her up. Let her spend all her time with blind people and forget about me."

"I think nothing. Is choice." Bartalan lifted his brush again and slashed thin gray lines across the towers, creating the impression of a driving rain.

Paul left the lab at a quarter to five, feeling strangely exhausted. He kept thinking of the choice Bartalan had presented to him. Allow their marriage to drift apart? Or hold on to her, force her to stay connected to a world that meant pain and loss. He wanted to keep her, wanted it with all his being, but was that selfish? She'd been through enough pain; he didn't want to be the source of more. He found her sitting on the couch, immersed again, unaware of his presence. She was lonely; he could understand that. On SightLink, everyone was blind, so blindness was not a barrier. Not a knife separating husband and wife. Could he give her up for her own happiness? Should he?

He walked down to the basement, still hearing Bartalan's dry pronouncement. "Is choice." A choice between his wife's

happiness and his own. Paul sat on the swivel chair and faced the bank of lasers.

There was a third option.

He dialed up all three rhodamine lasers to full power and rested his face on the chin support. He sat frozen that way for long minutes, his hand on the switch, knowing there would be no going back. To become blind in order to see. To understand Felicia again, to have the same goals, the same passions. What could be more important? He flipped the switch.

A scream, not his own. Something smashed into the back of his head, knocking him off the swivel chair. He looked up in time to see Felicia swinging a bar stool, equipment crashing to the floor in a splintering of glass and plastic. She dropped the stool.

"Can you see?" she said.

"What?"

"Can you still see?"

"Yes."

Paul staggered to his feet. She took two quick steps and wrapped her arms around him.

"It's not like you think," she said. "It's a fantasy world. It's not real."

Paul held her. His hands were trembling.

"It's not a gift," she said. "That's how Bartalan feels, but it's not that way for most of us."

Paul ran his fingers through her hair. "I don't want to leave you," he said.

"I don't want you to either. Why didn't you talk to me?"

"I thought you'd feel trapped. I thought it was a choice between you fully embracing your blindness, and you staying with me."

"It is," she said. "But it's not your choice to make."

"I'm sorry."

She laughed shakily. "You were ready to blind yourself for my sake. No apology needed."

The next day, Bartalan Varga flew back to Budapest. Paul returned to the lab to find a finished painting among the reams of brain scan printouts in his office. He studied it for a long time: the modern shop fronts, the European cars, the steel truss bridge over the Danube River. And in the middle of it all, two stone towers rising out of a jumble of crushed Baroque architecture.

Pedestrians hurried by on the sidewalks, clutching umbrellas. A dog huddled under an awning. Then, as his eyes swept across at street level, Paul saw something he'd never noticed before. In the rubble beyond the towers, leaning against a crumbling chancel wall, was scaffolding. Yellow scaffolding, three levels high, bolstered with wooden slats tied on with scraps of canvas. Now that he saw it, Paul looked for other evidence of restoration and found it: the corner of a dump truck behind the church, and a tiny area where the rubble had been cleared away.

Paul sat down at his desk and began organizing the printouts, a smile on his face. Perhaps there was hope after all.

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