

FRANK #2 & MR RICE #2

Molly Sweeney wasn't born blind. She was functionally blind and lived in a blind world for forty years. But she wasn't clinically blind: her retinas weren't totally insensitive to light. For God's sake how often did the husband, Mr. Autodidact, tell me that she was aware of the shadow of his hand in front of her face?

So, in theory, perhaps — purely theoretically — her case wasn't exactly hopeless. But I did make a point of giving her and her husband the only statistic available to us; and a dispiriting statistic it is. The number of cases known to us — of people who became blind shortly after birth and had their sight restored many years later — the number of cases over the past ten centuries is not more than twenty. Twenty people in a thousand years.

I know she believed me. I wasn't at all sure Frank Constantine did.

Anyhow, as a result of that first cursory examination in my home, I decided to bring her into the clinic for tests.

FRANK. Well of course the moment Rice said in that uppity voice of his, "In theory — in theory — perhaps in theory" — the first time Molly met him — after a few general questions, a very quick examination — ten o'clock in the morning in his house — I'll never forget it — the front room in the rented bungalow — no fire — the remains of last night's supper on a tray in the fireplace — teapot, crusts, cracked mug — well of course, goddammit, of course the head exploded! Just exploded!

Molly was going to see! I knew it! For all his perhapses! Absolutely no doubt about it! A new world — a new life! A new life for both of us!

MIRACLE OF MOLLY SWEENEY. GIFT OF SIGHT RESTORED TO MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN.

"I'VE BEEN GIVEN A NEW WORLD," SAYS MRS. SWEENEY;

UNEMPLOYED HUSBAND CRIES OPENLY. And why not?

Oh my God ...

Sight ...

I saw an Austrian psychiatrist on the television one night. Brilliant man. Brilliant lecture. He said that when the mind is confronted by a situation of overwhelming intensity — a moment of terror or ecstasy or tragedy — to protect itself from overload, from overcharge, it switches off and focuses on some trivial detail associated with the experience.

And he was right. I know he was. Because that morning in that front room in the chilly bungalow — immediately after that moment of certainty, that explosion in the head — my mind went numb; fused; and all I could think of was that there was a smell of fresh whiskey off Rice's breath. And at ten o'clock in the morning that seemed the most astonishing thing in the world and I could barely stop myself from saying to Molly, "Do you not smell the whiskey off his breath? The man's reeking of whiskey!"

Ridiculous ...

MR. RICE. Tests revealed that she had thick cataracts on both eyes. But that wasn't the main problem. She also had retinitis pigmentosa; as the name suggests a discolouration of the retina. She seemed to have no useful retinal function. It wasn't at all surprising that other doctors had been put off.

There were scars of old disease, too. But what was encouraging — to put it at its very best — was that there was no current, no active disease process. So that if I were to decide to operate and if the operation were even partially successful, her vision, however impaired, ought to be stable for the rest of her life.

So in theory perhaps ...

FRANK. On the morning of Tuesday, October the 7th, he operated on the right eye to remove a cataract and implant a new lens.

I was told not to visit her until the following day because the eye would be bandaged for twenty-four hours and

she had to have as much rest and quiet as possible. Naturally, of course ...

And a wonderful thing happened that night when I was at home by myself. I got a call from London; from a friend I knew in Nigeria in the old days. Chap called Winterman, Dick Winterman. Inviting me to set up and supervise a food convoy to Ethiopia. Was I interested?

Of course I was interested. The first job I'd been offered in months. But not now. How could I go now for God's sake? Molly was on the verge of a new life. I had to be with her now. Anyhow, as I told Dick, those rambling days were over.

All the same it was nice to be remembered. And to be remembered on that night — I thought that was a good omen.

MR. RICE. I'm ashamed to say that within a week I crossed the frontier into the fantasy life again. The moment I decided I was going to operate on Molly I had an impulse — a dizzying, exuberant, overmastering, intoxicating instinct to phone Roger Bloomstein in New York and Hans Girder in Berlin and Hiroshi Matoba in Kyoto — even old Murnahan in Dublin — and tell them what I was about to do. Yes, yes, especially old Murnahan in Dublin; and say to him, "Paddy Rice here, Professor. Of course you remember him! You called him a rogue star once — oh, yes, that caused a titter. Well, he works in a rundown hospital in Donegal now. And I suspect, I think, I believe for no good reason at all that Paddy Rice is on the trembling verge, Professor. He has a patient who has been blind for forty years. And do you know what? He is going to give her vision — the twenty-first recorded case in over a thousand years! And for the first time in her life — how does Saint Mark put it in the gospel? — for the first time in her life she will 'see men walking as if like trees.'

Delirium ... hubris ... the rogue star's token insurrection ... a final, ridiculous flourish. For God's sake, a routine cataract operation?

Of course I made no calls. Instead I wrote to my daughters, Aisling and Helga, in Geneva, and enclosed what money I could afford. Then to Maria, my ex-wife, in New York; yet another open-heart letter, full of candour and dreary honesty. I told her I was busy and in good spirits and involved in a new case that was unusual in some respects.

Then I made supper; had a few drinks; fell asleep in the armchair. I woke again at 4:00 A.M., my usual hour, and sat there waiting for a new day, and said to myself over and over again: why the agitation over this case? You remove cataracts every day of the week, don't you? And isn't the self-taught husband right? (*Angrily.*) What has she to lose for Christ's sake? Nothing! Nothing at all!

~~MOLLY. What a party we had the night before the operation! Three o'clock in the morning before we got the house cleared. Oh, God! And I had to be in the hospital for ten — fasting. Frank wanted to get a taxi but I said we should walk to get all that alcohol out of the system.~~

~~And it wasn't that we had organised anything that night. A few neighbours just dropped in to wish me luck; and then a few more; and then Frank said, "Come on! This is beginning to feel like a wake!"; and away he went to the office and came back with a load of stuff.~~

~~Who was there? Tony and Betty from this side; with Molly, their baby; they called her after me; she was just a toddler then. And the Quinns from that side; Jack and Mary. Jack wasn't drinking for some reason and Mary certainly was; so that was a delicate situation. And old Mr. O'Neill from across the street; first time outside his house since his wife, Louise, died three months before; and Frank just took him by the arm and said he would fall into a decline if he didn't pull himself together. Anyhow, after two or three beers, what does Mr. O'Neill do? Up on top of the table and begins reciting "A Bunch of the Boys Were Whooping It Up in the Malamute Saloon" — or whatever the right name is! Yes! Little timid Mr. O'Neill, the mourning widower! Somebody told me recently that he's in a hospice now.~~