

Death in Disneyland

By

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With his wife and eldest daughter away for the weekend, Eric Malek set out to entertain the remaining 12 year old child, also a daughter, in accord with her heart's desire. Naturally, from among the infinite choices lying between the meaningful and kitsch, she chose the ultimate in kitsch, Disneyland. After all, she was 12. Her friend, Isabel, slept over the night before. She and Jill naturally talked late into the night. Eric slept fitfully, perhaps foreshadowing the pain of the following day.

Don't worry, no real death occurred. He and the two girls survived, or at least the two girls did. Eric left that night, after gulping down a glass of wine at a nicer place in Downtown Disney, sobered at least, perhaps even depressed, perhaps even severely so. The Merlot took the edge off. Maybe he has still never recovered. What died was a certain illusion of connection of family. What died was illusion period. What died was the denial of what Tennessee Williams once said: "We are all living in solitary confinement." And that's what he said as he left the Park that night: "I am in solitary confinement."

Perhaps it was the fact that he was reading Jean Rhys' *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* that caused the transformation. It was indeed absurd for him to have been reading that book, at Disneyland of all places. Perhaps it was that his wife was away,

with her sisters, signaling some sort of lack of need for him, a certain sort of separation process beginning after some 20 years of marriage. Perhaps it was that his eldest, Julia, was away at a retreat on her own, with friends, no longer in need of the support of family. Perhaps it was that Jill was at Disneyland with Isabel and they were together, and not with him. Yes, it was all these things, and more. Jean Rhys' character was as lonely as a single blade of grass emerging from a crack in a vast parking lot. Her main companion was alcohol. That same companion had accompanied Jean Rhys herself.

Eric, who seems to have attached to his children to replace what was so missing from his relationship with his parents, first saw their exodus from his life that day. Not just saw, but felt. It started during the first few minutes as he parked the car and then raced into the Park and onto Raiders of the Lost Ark; by their flight on Soaring Over America, towards the end of the day, it was over. He was alone, as alone as he'd been at age 7 when his mother poured milk over his head at the breakfast table because he was late for school. He'd attempted to cover over the aloneness in a thousand ways, hard work in school, flight into romantic relationships as early as he could have them, substantial but not mind-blowing amounts of drugs to be followed shortly thereafter by years of psychotherapy and, only recently, medication. He'd pursued Zen Meditation for four years. He'd excelled in his profession, chaired numerous committees, wrote papers, gave speeches, created deep and long-lasting friendships. These, and enough other approaches to fill volumes with description alone, had all worked to some extent, but a basic, bone chilling alone feeling never really left him. That particular Disneyland day marked the ending of yet another of those illusions, the illusion of the closely knit family.

In retrospect, when flying some months later, alone, to visit a friend of his who'd recently had a liver transplant, he traced the meeting with such intense aloneness or, really, with death, to the prior night. It was while lying in bed alone, reading, and listening to the two girls talking down the hall that it came to him. It arrived almost like a greeting from death itself. They were cheerfully talking, laughing, anticipating. They had entire lives yet to live. The next day was like the only day to them. Eric was reading about Jean Rhys' character's desperate efforts to find love and money, alone in Paris. He was alone in a bed in a house in a wonderful suburban neighborhood. He wondered if this would be what the end would be like, but without the children laughing.

I first learned of his descent a few weeks later when he called me. I'd been one of his closest friends, for over 20 years, and, ironically, although I am a psychiatrist, I was usually the one who had turned to him for help over the years. Eric always hid behind a certain façade, always busy, always competent, always compassionate. I'd been through relationship after relationship, had struggled with depression, had also had years of psychotherapy and medication. Yet his love had been among the strongest features of my recovery. I consider myself permanently indebted to him. I'd made and lost a few friendships, always believing that I was somehow at fault. Eric talked me through all these periods of self-doubt, and, through the very act of his continuing friendship with me, proved that I could indeed sustain an intimate friendship. Yet, even for all those years, Eric had never shared the depth of the loneliness he felt. When he'd pass through episodes each two or three years – which he had described to me – I'd only be invited in after the problem was resolving. It was as if he simply could not be present to me when in the throes of his version of severe mental pain, a feeling of terror as he would describe

it in retrospect. After Disneyland, that changed. He described the descent as it occurred, feeling too desperate this time to pass through it this time alone.

So, back to Disneyland then, he'd actually invited me to go with him, with my son, and maybe that would have delayed or even prevented his decline. I couldn't make it. I think I had other plans. I sort of regret it now, knowing all the pain he's been through, but what are you going to do...

He'd enjoyed quite an up period in the weeks prior. I remember him telling me he was on an intellectual kick period, reading the Complete Short Stories of Kafka, in anticipation of a summer trip to Eastern Europe. He had read Hamlet with his weekly reading group. He was finishing his second Jean Rhys novel while actually at Disneyland that day. The "intellectual period," as he liked to call it, was just another search (was it all in vain?) for some kind of fulfillment that seemed to forever elude him.

To hear him tell it, his undoing, which fortunately now looks temporary, but will likely be back, was actually the result of irony. Each positive aspect of the Disneyland experience, planned to highlight denial and allow only the positive aspects of life to shine, drew him further down. Eric felt like he was driving deep into a cavernous tunnel as he first entered the parking structure that morning. The structure, in reality, was elevated, but he felt like he was entering a dark, mountainous cave. As the girls laughed lightly in the back seat of the old Volvo, itself representing decay with its rattles and its elastic-band held-together sun visor, he felt increasingly distant. It was as if he were in a limo, in the driver's seat, and a glass partition, or maybe even a bulletproof one, had been raised between the front and back seats. His smile was a bit forced as he feigned the celebration of the day, exclaiming to his passengers, "We're here, look there's the

entrance, there's where they take the \$7 for parking." He smiled for real now as he remembered Jill's having thrown up once, when he and Anita, his wife, had taken the girls, on a surprise visit, and she lost her breakfast from her excitement.

As they waited for the tram, the level of kitsch, which was to persist throughout the day, entered Eric's system like an asthmatic inhalant: The perfectly manicured lawns; the perfectly uniformed tram attendants; the perfectly cleaned and shined tram itself. Couldn't the girls see it themselves? No, they were already become enraptured by the dream it promises, of cleanliness and hygiene, of clarity and sense. The separation began at that point. They entered that world of magic, of perfection; Eric split off from it, worse than ever before, into a land of darkness to which he would descend the next two months. But for the caring of a few close friends, and of course me with my insistent, daily contact with him, he likely would have landed himself in a psychiatric hospital. (Not that that would have helped).

Jill had no inkling of her father's despair. He was hiding it, of course. She usually would have sensed it nonetheless, having an extremely close, almost uncanny-like intuitive connection with him. She looked just like him. But she was lost in the perfect world with Isabel. And as the tram neared the ticketing gates, their mutual enthusiasm peaked. They talked of which rides to see first. They planned where to eat their first meal. They giggled and laughed. (It occurred to Eric, at just about this point, that they had every right to melt into this world of illusion; Disneyland offered up such fare, and they, clinging to their last few months of childhood, were the most eager of consumers).

The tram came to a stop, and a pleasantly-voiced recording reminded the passengers to remain seated, exit to the right, remember personal items. The recording took the place of part of all the passengers minds, acting for them, reminding them, and preparing them for an etherizing experience.

Eric didn't hear the pleasant sounding recording. He had his backpack at the ready, with the bottles of cold water, the sunscreen, a few snacks, and other amenities intended to offer the little beings with him the most full of wonder experience possible. Eric snuck a peek at the page of the Rhys novel he was reading, a telling paragraph describing her despair as she wait in the drawing room of a wealthy male acquaintance, hoping for some money that would allow her to buy some Pernod and stay in her rented room another day or two. He refused her the money. She stumbled down the steps of his mansion, uncertain of even the next few hours.

So she walked along a Parisian street, went into the closest bar, looked around seductively and waited for a customer to offer her a drink, which they invariably did. And thus her life progressed, from seedy bar to low-rent hotel rooms, from one meaningless encounter with a man to another.

By the time these images of Rhys' character had left his mind, the three of them were standing, waiting in the entrance line. Jill and Isabel were near ecstatic. Eric awakened, as if from a hypnotic trance, and joined them briefly in the reverie. They had their bags carefully searched (this being almost enough to pull Eric back into darkness again). They then entered the Magic Kingdom, straining facial muscles with their smiles, jumping up and down in glee. These girls had, in fact, entered paradise.

Paradise, as most people know, begins with a sign that reads, [get the entry sign name from D-land]. It is, of course, a lie, one that Eric had enjoyed in his earliest years and even well into adulthood although this descent, while it lasted, felt to him like paradise had never existed. For the first time, he passed through those gates expecting tragedy, not magic. And tragedy greeted him soon enough, silently, inwardly, while the two girls frolicked, blissfully unaware of the true dangers lurking all around them. The division between bliss, perfection, freedom from feces and the world of darkness and aloneness grew to be as wide and treacherous as the eight lane freeway he'd taken to the Park.

Like I said, and these details have emerged from the many, now daily telephone conversations I've had with Eric since the day-trip, they walked, nearly ran to Raiders of the Lost Ark ride. He slipped away, partially, while on the ride. He usually closes his eyes at the part where the huge ball of rock comes careening towards the stalled jeep in which he and the girls were riding. This time he looked with his eyes wide open, not really fearing the rock striking him. It was almost with surprise that he greeted the jeep starting up and moving away at the last minute. He seems to have partially dissociated at that point. He could hear the girls screaming, in fear and excitement, but their voice tones were muted. When he looked across at them, they seemed less clear, almost as if the outlines of their bodies were blurred. He felt distant. He felt compelled to act normal, to be the father and guardian, but it was purely an act.