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Salem Witches

Several years ago my body was playing tricks on me, and I spent several days in the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) at Chippenham Hospital. I'm sure now that it was a time of great concern for Paul and the rest of my family, but I mostly remember the amusing incidents which kept the time there from seeming interminable. I was sure then, as I am now, that my mind was working pretty well, when I wasn't asleep, an activity which occupied a considerable part of my time there.

The environment should have been stressful - there I was in a tiny room whose only solid wall was the outside wall; the rest was mostly glass, looking out onto the central nurses' station. My "room" was a kind of wedge, containing my hospital bed, a small cabinet, and room enough for a nurse to visit me frequently, Paul to come in at prescribed, short intervals, and once in what must have been a crisis, for our Pastoral Associate Nancy Warman and Paul and a different-from-usual cardiologist to be present for the latter to explain to us the need for a cardiac catheterization, followed by a video tape of the procedure. The amenities in the room were minimal, but there was a large clock, and the lights were never turned off. I had no personal possessions except my glasses, not even my own gowns. Once I wanted to adjust my bed and couldn't find the control; my lovely nurse, Pat Hartsack, who soon became a really good friend, explained that she was my bed control and she thought the bed was just fine.

I could see three of the other units (I think there were eight) and part of the goings and comings of Pat and three or four other nurses, all hardworking, caring women. One evening I was entertained by the nurses' having a pizza feast in the few minutes they had for eating. I was amazed that I could not smell the pizza, but I suppose the ventilation system was such that no odors (or aromas, in the case of pizza) circulated to the "rooms." I was especially intrigued with that idea because I had recently read that some hospitals had decreed that popcorn could no longer be popped in microwaves on the floors occupied by patients because the pervasive smell upset those who couldn't have popcorn.

While the nurses were eating their pizza, an alarm went off in one of the rooms I couldn't see. One nurse left momentarily, only to have the alarm go off again. After a couple more alarms, she simply called out, "Breathe, George!" and the bell ceased. It was necessary to tell George to breathe several more times. I asked Pat about the incident the first time she came in to adjust whatever equipment needed adjustment. In an amused voice, she said, "George is trying to wean himself from breathing." Somehow that seemed an adequate explanation at the time. Much later, I had cause to wonder about such a serious condition. In fact, he may have been the patient who died; I thought of that because I saw the nurse who had answered his alarm shedding a few tears the next day.

But the best entertainment was furnished by the woman whose room was in my direct line of sight across the nursing station. I became aware of two prominent eyes outlined by large tortoiseshell glasses. They appeared to be staring, without blinking, at me. The staring continued until the idea occurred to me that in just such a manner she would have

been a very upsetting phenomenon in the witch-obsessed atmosphere of Salem in the late seventeenth century. The fancy amused me, and I felt that I had an insight into the psychology which must have existed then. I could easily believe that a susceptible person could believe that, with such a very intense stare, she could be "sucking my soul from my body." My health must have been improving, for I needed that diversion to keep me entertained. She was still staring during one of Paul's brief visits. He, too, saw the intensity of her gaze. I'm surprised now that I never did discuss her with my nurse friend. I wish I'd found out something about her. At night her light was turned off; *my* light was always on. During the day she could get out of bed and stand in the entrance to her room in order to get on with her staring; there was no way I could have gotten out of bed with all the tubes and wires I wore. All I remember seeing of her is a cloud of darkish blond hair surrounding her big eyes and otherwise blank face. I do remember the stare and the ideas it provoked. I felt I could understand the Salem people who accused others of witchcraft. The idea kept me pleasantly if eerily occupied.

My stay in intensive care couldn't have been longer than four days, but the caring personality of my nurse, George's breathing, and the witch's stare make unforgettable memories.