

Full Circle by Gail Loon Lustig

While I sat watching the French movie in sub-optimal conditions, I started feeling more uncomfortable than I could account for. It was Friday morning and there were still a few hours to go before we dispersed for home.

We were at our annual conference for social workers and family doctors. Our formal task was to draw up a workable plan for the new syllabus for our residents in the Family Medicine program.

The task was proving arduous; hard to be enthusiastic and innovative without enough funding, like knitting a sweater with too little wool.

"We can do it! We must try!", the Head of the Department encouraged. We toiled through the working sessions in a hall tucked away in the basement with air-conditioning blowing gusts of cold air which seemed to be too thin to be inspiring.

Outside, the grey clouds had gathered in the distance; the temperatures were soaring and after every coffee break, we scuttled down to our work-room avoiding the humidity that was rising on the patio overlooking the Mediterranean.

The last session was a lecture on the place of "Medicine" in movie-making, delivered by a *fundi* on the subject. The movie he had chosen to show us, was about an overworked, dedicated general practitioner working in a small village in France.

I felt myself struggling to find a comfortable spot on the patterned ruby-red carpet which was sticky and full of dust under my out-stretched hand. I wasn't happy about the movie being in French and even less so when I missed some of the Hebrew subtitles which sped across the bottom of the screen.

There was something about the expression on the doctor's face, his dark-brown eyes, as he looked at his patients or himself in the mirror, that struck a chord in my perception of the character. While following him through his daily routine which made up the pattern of his life, it struck me how alone he seemed. I noticed the people around him who tried to get close to him; his mother, his devoted secretary, the waitress in the café where he drank coffee, his daily help who meticulously ironed his shirts, the patients who shyly offered him their advice about his personal "other" life which seemed to be non-existent. He was

impervious to their efforts, choosing to cloak himself in his white-coat or gain comfort from the little mannerisms he adopted to keep his sense of control.

"Gail, where are you? We're waiting for you to join the panel.."

We had been asked to voice our opinions about the movie. If we were the directors, would we have ended it in a different way? What would be a fitting reward for the doctor if we could choose to give him one?

I was second in turn after Miri, the Social Worker who spoke about the "ideal" doctor we'd just seen on the screen. She mentioned something about her own family which watching the movie had evoked in her.

I took the microphone, started to speak and felt myself bowled over by emotion.

The only image that persisted before my eyes, was of a small, yellow-brick flat roofed clinic, far away in Cape Town, that had been built on to our house almost like a pocket stitched on to a shirt. The door that was always shut, separated my father's two worlds. It was in his "Surgery" that he received his patients, the White population to the right, the "Non-Whites" on the left. They had two separate waiting-rooms divided by a little office where the secretary sat directing the clinic.

As a child, I would open the door, and be struck by the smell of pills being dispensed and the sight of plaster that was used to set fractures, dirtying the basin. It was in the clinic that my father hid our secret treasure, a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica that came in two huge cardboard boxes from England with "Royal Mail" stamped on them. We brought a new volume into the house each month. It had been an expensive indulgence and I didn't need explaining why mostly, for the first few months anyway, I could only read them in the Non-White patients' examining room where they were kept.

Eventually, one evening, my father gave my mother the leather-bound copy of the Old Testament which came as a gift on purchasing the set. The edges of the pages had been sprayed in gold and the shiny pages were filled with illustrations of scenes from the Bible. She loved it and the peace offering seemed to work, for much earlier than I'd reckoned on, the books were on a shelf in our study.

My father worked, impassioned by his love of Medicine and the privilege of treating the sick. He was busy from early morning to night, seeing patients in the clinic,

doing home-visits, operating on urgent and elective problems, delivering babies and seemed to always arrive home to cold meals and an unhappy wife who once again needed to cancel the evening plans.

I suppose that throughout this period, I, the eldest, was the mediator in what then seemed to me to be like a mad existence with so few compensations, but for the many stories that emerged from that other world.

As I held the microphone, there was so much I wanted to say, but couldn't. The words were frozen in my mouth; I felt my eyes filling with tears. I turned and asked for someone else to take over.

Before going home, I popped in to visit my parents who were preparing for *Shabat*. My father was sitting on his chair, the headphones over his ears, while he watched a soccer game being broadcast from Johannesburg.

"How was your conference?", he asked.

"It was good. We saw a movie about a dedicated village doctor in France. I was on a panel and I became quite emotional for some reason while commenting on my feelings....."

"Really?" came the question and I felt his eyes on my face just like he does when he's trying to work out what's really going on in my head.

"Uh huh....still need to think about it though.."

" You do that, but in the mean-time I'd like to show you my latest painting I did this morning? Tell me what you think..."

I smiled and thought about something I already knew; rewards we most appreciate are what we choose to give ourselves.

Now I could go home and think about other things too.

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