

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (Le Scaphandre Et Le Papillon)

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It is commonly said that everyone has one novel in them. Jean-Dominique Bauby, editor of French Elle, had a contract with a publishing house to write a book based on his favourite book, The Count of Monte Cristo. Before he could start he suffered a catastrophic stroke resulting in “locked in” syndrome. He moved from the wish to die, to live and dictated a novel of his experience, by blinking one eyelid, to a dedicated assistant.

Watching a film about illness was not appealing on a winter’s evening after surgery. It is fortunate that we have friends who make us do things we choose not to.

The film opens with Bauby coming round from his initial coma to find himself in a neurological and rehabilitation facility by the sea, in the same town where he holidayed as a child. We are drawn into Bauby’s unfocussed realisation that no one can hear him, and that there is something seriously amiss. We hear his inner monologue and experience the claustrophobia and terror. His only movement is his eyelid. We accompany him as a cheery ophthalmologist sews up one of his eyes, while telling Bauby about the quality of the snow on his skiing holiday. Bauby is crying out inside his head.

The nature of communication is explored in the film: the contrast between the neurologist who tells it like it is but has other things to attend to, and the speech therapist, who has time to spend and is more emotionally involved. It is the speech therapist who suggests using an alphabet with the letters in the order of frequency. All Bauby has to do is blink when the necessary letter is spoken. There are poignant scenes between Bauby and his ill father; a portrayal of a certain generation of fathers and sons and how they speak of pride and love. There is the dull pain evoked by his young child wiping the saliva off his face, and the grief of his ex-girlfriend having to speak his words to his current love.

Bauby has an ironic wit and he never loses his appreciation of finer things. He eyes up the therapists, and his vivid imagination means that he can eat in the best restaurants with any woman he desires. The phone men deliver a phone to his room, but cannot understand why a person with no speech would order a phone, except perhaps for heavy breathing. They leave laughing much to Bauby’s amusement, and his therapist’s horror.

The film is most moving when dealing with his loneliness and the loss of physical contact. The emptiness of an institution on a Sunday with little staff, no therapists, and few visitors is profound. The inability to touch and hold his children as a father would.

I was mistaken to dismiss this as a film about illness. It is a film about a man who felt love, anger, amusement, and thought about sex. It is a sobering, humorous and beautiful reminder that people remain very human, despite the disabilities that may affect them.

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