

## Waving at the Ceiling

The sitter texted, “He’s waving at the ceiling.”

What are we supposed to do with that information?

Harley has been seeing people who aren’t there for the last couple of years. He’ll ask, “Who is that woman with a baby sitting in that chair?” He nodded at the chair where his wife used to sit. At first, we tried to convince him there was no one there, but that didn’t work. Then we got advice from experts on how to respond to people with dementia who are hallucinating. Rather than trying to persuade him otherwise, we’d say, “She’s not bothering anyone. Maybe she just needs to rest a little while. How about we let her sit there while we go on about our business?” It worked most of the time.

In Harley’s mind, there really was a woman with a baby sitting in Nana’s chair. She was just beyond arm’s length. He could tell you what she was wearing: a white blouse with an orange scarf. His hallucinations were his reality. Why challenge his reality? Why not acknowledge what he sees? An imaginary woman with an imaginary baby in an actual chair doesn’t pose a danger. We can convince him of that!

“Who is that man on the porch?” he frequently fretted. We learned to say, “That’s probably just the man who’s here to cut the grass,” or “That’s the service man who came by to pick up a tool he left when he was here last week checking on the air conditioner.” Of course, there was no man on the porch. Nor did we ever see the people by the fence in the back yard that he insisted were there. They were there often, in Harley’s mind. Dealing with Harley’s hallucinations called for us to be creative and be quick about it. Lying makes us uncomfortable, but if we can give him some reassurance by using our own imaginations, we can live with that. Our intent is to have him live more peacefully.

It wasn’t just people. He’d see a dog at the foot of his chair.

“Whose dog is that?”

“We’re not sure, but he seems friendly. You’ve always been good with dogs. I remember when you were the first person in town to have a Shar-pei. Didn’t you have to drive to Atlanta to get that dog from the airport?”

“Yes,” he says. “That was an expensive dog. A good dog, but very expensive.” We’d listen to another telling of the how he communicated with the breeder and arranged for transportation. He’d go on to describe the health issues that plagued that dog. We’re happy when distraction provides some relief.

Those were better times when his imaginary people were not so threatening. As dementia tightened its grip, he insisted he had been assaulted by four men who held him down and beat him. “They accosted me! I don’t know why. They wouldn’t say. I called out for help, but no one came.”

Lately he claims that the police are coming for him. He expects to be arrested. For what, he cannot say. He believes there are two lawsuits against him. He wants an update. “You don’t need to worry about lawsuits. Bruce is taking care of all that. Isn’t it great to have a lawyer as a son?” Of course, there are no lawsuits but it would be impossible to convince him otherwise. Fortunately, Harley’s memory is sufficiently reliable on some topics. He remembers that his son Bruce *is* a lawyer and will do everything in his power to protect and defend him.

In these last months, Harley’s imagination torments him most of the time he’s awake. Harley has always been an anxious person. No one who knows him well would say he’s the “happy-go-lucky” type. Quite the opposite. He’s quick to recognize risk or threat or danger. Biologists would argue that such caution is beneficial for the survival of an individual. Timid organisms of all types, not just humans, are more likely to survive and reproduce. Indeed, Harley has three children. Two are much like their father. Alas, traits are not perfectly heritable. Harley’s youngest son was notoriously mischievous. Elliot “lived large” and appeared unafraid of consequences. Elliot was the one who would “poke the bear.” The wind was full of caution that Elliot threw into it! Biologists would say that adventurers and explorers like Elliot are necessary for discovery and exploitation of resources and processes that benefit the species. Biologists would

say that populations consisting of Elliots and Harleys explain how it is that humans have come to have dominion over the Earth.

Dementia is exacerbated by traumatic loss. Henry had two major losses in the last two years: First, we lost Nana, his wife of nearly 50 years, who died from complications due to Covid. A year later our cheerful rambunctious Elliot died unexpectedly of a heart attack at age fifty-seven.

Paranoia is common in late-stage dementia. Paranoia paired with hallucinations is a miserable condition. Most of Harley's waking hours are spent in this nightmarish state. People are lurking in the hall or in his room. These people intend to hurt him. Hour after hour. Day after day. Who can say what he dreams? Perhaps not even sleep allows escape from threats and beatings.

When the sitter texted, "He's waving at the ceiling," I want to think that he's greeting dear ones who aren't with us in the flesh but are with us in spirit. I want to believe Harley is waving to Nana and Elliot. I want to believe it is not a wave of farewell. I want to believe it is a wave of greeting, an indication of an impending arrival and a happy reunion.

Onward,

GR Davis Jr

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