



Room for a view

Pierre

M and Mme Jacques lived on the edge of a marsh in a low wooden house. It was a lonely place where, on one side, the marsh led down to the grey, turbulent sea. The wind carried the smell of mud and of the living and the dying plants that somehow managed to be part of the life-cycle of the ooze. On the other side were flat lowlands where scrubby grass lay flattened as if it were hiding from the fierce salty winds that blew constantly over the twisted brown blades, frustrating any attempt to grow toward the sun.

They were simple folk, he short and square, with a bull neck and with hands thick from a lifetime's labour. She was taller, deferential and modest. I never saw her without a pinafore, even under her coat. It was 35 years ago. They lived in that gentle country fashion in which someone always takes care of the weakest members of the community, those who cannot fend for themselves. In this case, they had adopted Pierre. He stood before me: short, blind, wearing blue overalls, sneakers and a plaid hat with a long peak designed to shield the eyes from the glare of the sun. This was anomalous and sadly paradoxical, as his eyes were contracted in their sockets and the indrawn lids tightly closed. His eyelashes were knitted together in irregular black knots and fused with a yellow, sticky and purulent glue.

Pierre's brow was furrowed with anxiety; deep lines, like the scratchings of crows' feet, grooved his forehead. He sucked continuously at his pursed dry lips, muttering all the while, "I feel terrible, I feel terrible, I feel terrible."

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"I feel terrible, I feel terrible, I feel terrible, I feel terrible."

"He's been like this for years, Doctor, just saying that over and over," said Mme Jacques, concerned.

He had lived with them for seven years. His habit was to sit in a corner of the main room by the fire, repeating his sad mantra in a monotonous tone.

This good couple had taken him in

because he was alone and helpless. They fed and clothed him and, to tell the truth, he did not appear to be much trouble. Occasionally he would wander from the house and get lost. Once he disappeared for two days. They looked for him everywhere; in fact, the whole village searched for him until a teenager from the village came across him lying in the woods, repeating, "I feel terrible, I feel terrible." Ever since, he had repeated this all his waking hours and sometimes in his sleep. I gathered that this had continued unchanged for over 20 years.

M. and Mme Jacques tried frantically at first to find out what troubled him. There was no hint of anything that would cause him distress; there was no obvious change in his colour or his eating habits and he didn't seem to be in physical pain. Eventually they accepted it as one of life's unknowns.

Like the sufferings of Job, Pierre's condition had to be accepted as part of the mysterious workings of God. It was always a concern to them, no doubt, and every so often they would seek reassurance that nothing needed to be done to help him. They had brought him to me because I was the new doctor; perhaps I would know.

"What's the problem, Pierre?" I repeated.

"I feel terrible, I feel terrible." His mumbling continued unbroken. It was as if, lost in his misery, he did not hear me.

I examined him from head to toe. There was no clue to what ailed him. The fact that he had been like this for years suggested that whatever troubled him posed no threat to his life. Perhaps

it was a psychological or mental phenomenon, a curiosity of the brain; perhaps the sequel to a small stroke, an occluded blood vessel? All I could do was to reassure the good M. and Mme Jacques that nothing needed to be done and to thank them for their concern and for bringing him to me.

After a while I relegated the enigma of Pierre to the recesses of my brain wherein go mysteries and the unexplained, until some small trigger opens the door to their recollection.

One night they called.

"We're very worried about Pierre, Doctor. Please, can you come?" And so out to the marsh and the small house by the sea. M. and Mme Jacques greeted

me at the door, anxious and tousled. In a small neat bed in an attic bedroom with a sloping wall was Pierre. He was sitting up, and by the light of the kerosene lamp I could see that he was not frowning.

"How are you, Pierre?" I asked.

"I feel fine, I feel fine."

I turned to M. and Mme Jacques and asked, "How long has he been like that?"

"Just this evening," said Mme Jacques. "I've never seen him like this before."

I couldn't find anything physically wrong with him. I shrugged my shoulders, and we all looked at each other in amazement.

During the night Pierre died peacefully in his sleep.

Alan J. Lupin

Honorary Professor
Department of Surgery
University of British Columbia

