

Eavesdropping By Eudora Welty

When I was six or seven, I was taken out of school and put to bed for several months for an ailment the doctor described as “fast-beating heart.” I felt all right—perhaps I felt too good. It was the feeling of suspense. At any rate, I was allowed to occupy all day my parent’s double bed in the front upstairs bedroom.

I was supposed to rest, and the little children didn’t get to run in and excite me often. Davis School was as close as across the street. I could keep up with it from the window beside me, hear the principal ring her bell, see which children were tardy, watch my classmate seat together at recess: I knew their sandwiches. I was homesick for school; my mother made time for teaching me arithmetic and hearing my spelling.

An opulence of story books covered my bed; it was the “Land of Counterpane.” As I read away, I was Rapunzel, or the Goose Girl, or the Princess Labam in one of the Thousand and One Nights who mounted the roof of her palace every night and of her own radiance faithfully lighted the whole city just by reposing there, and I daydreamed I could light Davis School from across the street.

But I never dreamed I could learn as long as I was away from the schoolroom, and that bits of enlightenment far-reaching in my life went on as ever in their own good time. After they’d told me goodnight and tucked me in—although I knew that after I’d finally fallen asleep they’d pick me up and carry me away—my parents draped the lampshade with a sheet of the daily paper, which was tilted, like a hatbrim, so that they could sit in their rockers in a lighted part of the room and I could supposedly go to sleep in the protected dark of the bed. They sat talking. What was thus dramatically made a present of to me was the secure sense of the hidden observer. As long as I could make myself keep awake, I was free to listen to every word my parents said between them.

I don’t remember that any secrets were revealed to me, nor do I remember any avid curiosity on my part to learn something I wasn’t supposed to—perhaps I was too young to know what to listen for. But I was present in the room with the chief secret there was—two of them, father and mother, sitting there as one. I was conscious of this secret and of my fast-beating heart in step together, as I lay in the slant-shaded light of the room, with a brown, pear-shaped scorch in the newspaper shade where it had become overheated once.

What they talked about I have no idea, and the subject was not what mattered to me. It was no doubt whatever a young married couple spending their first time privately in each other's company in the long, probably harried day would talk about. It was the murmur of their voice, the back-and-forth, the unnoticed stretching away of time between my bedtime and theirs, that made me bask there at my distance. What I felt was not that I was excluded from them but that I was included, in—and because of—what I could hear of their voices and what I could see of their faces in the cone of yellow light under the brown-scorched shade.

I suppose I was exercising as early as then the turn of mind, the nature of temperament,

of a privileged observer; and owing to the way I became so, it turned out that I became the loving kind.

A conscious act grew out of this by the time I began to write stories: getting my distance, a prerequisite of my understanding of human events, is the way I begin work. Just as, of course, it was an initial step when, in my first journalism job, I stumbled into making pictures with a camera. Frame, proportion, perspective, the values of light and shade, all are determined by the distance of the observing eye.

I have always been shy physically. This in part tended to keep me rushing into things, including relationship, headlong. Not rushing headlong, though I may have wanted to, but beginning to write stories about people, I drew near slowly; noting and guessing, apprehending, hoping, drawing my eventual conclusions out of my own heart, I did venture closer to where I wanted to go. As time and my imagination led me on, I did plunge.