

What Beauty Does

by ALIX KATES SHULMAN

ONE DAY IT HAPPENS, THE DREADED EVENT THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE, the more dreadful because you don't know what form it will take or when it will occur. To me it happened on July 22, 2004, when my husband of twenty years fell nine feet from a sleeping loft, severely injuring his brain.

Before, he had been a sculptor. After, because of the damage to his frontal cortex, where planning, problem solving, and reasoning occur, he lost his ability to make art. His memory was so impaired that from the day of his fall onward, he was unable to retain new memories for more than a moment. He had no awareness of the accident or the hospital where he'd just spent three months ("What accident?" "What hospital?"). And though he continued to take pleasure from life, especially sensual beauty, he would immediately forget everything about the museum, concert, movie, or visit he had just spent hours enjoying, including that it had occurred. He was as dependent as someone with advanced Alzheimer's. He knew our family, friends, and others from his past, but of those he met after his fall, even caregivers he saw daily, their names and identities never took root, though in time he might come to know their faces. Season, month, year, century no longer registered; throughout the frenzied presidential primaries, he knew who Hillary was (lodged in long-term memory) but not Obama (short-term); and he couldn't find his way home from across the street. Yet behind his monumental confusion, and despite his agitation and sporadic violent outbursts, typical of traumatic brain injury, his precious self remained intact. The sunny opti-

mism, modesty, aesthetic enthusiasm, and loving nature of the man I'd married kept shining through the fog.

Then perhaps I should not have been so surprised when, on a daring trip to Tuscany almost two years after his fall, an object of beauty made the unprecedented leap from short-term memory to long-term in this passionate artist's brain.



Fearing our travels were over, when friends invited us to Tuscany for ten days in May 2006, to share a house they'd rented, I didn't hesitate. I could imagine no better circumstances for traveling with someone in Scott's condition. With Norm driving and Heather navigating, leaving me free to concentrate on Scott, and with Becca, an NYU student, along to assist us, the chances of success would be maximized. Still, I promised myself that if, despite my precautions, the trip was too hard, we'd turn right around and fly home.

"Here we are, darling. Rome!" I announced, as we deplaned.

"Rome? You mean the real Rome?" he said, looking around bewildered, even though I'd spoken of little else for weeks and all night he had raptly followed the plane's progress on the monitor.

We picked up our rental car and set off at once for Tuscany. "Where are we? What country are we in?" Scott repeated at every turn. Despite the signs in Italian, the red tile roofs, the distinctive landscape, he couldn't grasp that we were actually in Italy. Yet Italy was a country we had visited together often, starting in 1984, on the way home from Israel (where he took



me in order to demonstrate his solidarity with my Jewish roots and first proposed marriage), landing in the Rome airport only hours after the El Al counter had been destroyed by a terrorist bomb; and then on our honeymoon in Sicily and Florence four years later, and again every couple of years thereafter.

At last we turned up a narrow road toward a renovated farmhouse perched on a hilltop. The dirt drive was lined with vibrant yellow acacia trees in full spring bloom.

“Will you look at those yellow trees!” cried Scott.

“And they belong to our villa,” said Heather.

“Really? They’re ours?” He grinned with incredulous joy.

When I’d finished unpacking, I walked into Heather and Norm’s room to find Heather sobbing in Norm’s arms.

“What is it?” I cried.

Heather shook her head, tears streaming from her eyes. Sheepishly she said, “It’s Scott. And you.”

I was so used to him, to us, that I’d forgotten how helpless, even tragic, we appeared to others. To me Scott’s confusion and disorientation were such old news that what I focused on was his delight at traveling again.

“Don’t cry. He’s not unhappy. And neither am I—don’t you see? We’re here in Tuscany. With you. What could be better?”

Though Scott's confusion accompanied us everywhere, that veteran traveler and lifetime member of The Explorers Club was soon in his element. Nothing, not car sickness, fatigue, or disorientation could impede his continual delight. If he was often impatient to leave the restaurant or museum before the rest of us were ready, Becca took him by the hand to a garden or yet another café to sit and talk until the rest of us were ready to join them. Sometimes he expressed his impatience not, as he commonly did since his fall, through agitation, but charmingly, urging us to "move-on-dot-com!" or by singing an invented song, like a drunk near closing time. It was not that his old self had been supplanted, only that a new, less inhibited and flashier layer had been superimposed. But to those of us who knew him well, behind his showy new front he was still Scott, shaky but intact, the tall, sweet, blue-eyed guy who loved—had always loved—traveling.

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And indeed, with no decisions forced on him, with Norm as driver, Heather and me as cooks, and Becca as personal attendant, what was not to love? He relished the landscape, the villages and towns, the art, the food, the company, and especially those yellow trees, which his extreme memory loss kept as fresh as if each sighting were the first. "Can you come over here when you have a minute, darling? I want to show you something marvelous out the window. Just look at that yellow tree. Isn't it incredible?"

We arrived back in New York at midnight. The following day, after a long sleep, Scott said excitedly, "We forgot to bring something home from Tuscany. Something very important."

"We did?" I asked, stunned that he recalled we'd been away. "What?"

"A yellow tree!"

That he remembered being in Tuscany was astounding enough; that he remembered the acacia trees seemed nothing short of miraculous. His artist's eye had brought home across an ocean, from past to present, at least one vivid image in living color. To me it marked a turning point, a milestone of recall and recovery—which made me declare the trip a complete success.

A memory is a set of neural connections among brain cells. Sometimes the failure to remember something occurs because it can't be retrieved and sometimes because it wasn't properly

encoded to begin with. Little is known about the process by which memories are laid down, or how a short-term memory is converted to long-term, becoming electrochemically hardwired. But it is known that whether a given set of connections is made permanent sometimes depends upon emotions—otherwise you wouldn't remember the once-glimpsed face of your rival longer than that of your waiter, or be forever haunted by certain embarrassing moments—which may help to explain Scott's astonishing recall of our Tuscan adventure.

After Heather emailed us photos of the trip, Scott wouldn't stop looking at them. I put up an image of red tile roofs, taken from the highest point of the village, as my screensaver, then mounted prints in an album, which immediately became his favorite

book. He looked at it endlessly, commenting on each image. A few weeks later, looking at the album, he crowed, "What a trip that was! I seem to have come out of my shell on that trip. Glorious photos! Wonderful trip!" The pictures even sparked

memories of things of which there were no photos, like Norm's speeding up and down the hills, the grazing sheep, dogs barking at their heels.

Thinking back on that trip, undertaken as a risky experiment, for me too it was surprisingly no less gratifying than many another. All travel may be expansive, but that trip set a precedent for us by stretching the limits of what I thought possible to do with the new, impaired Scott.

With an artist companion's help, Scott, who had attempted no art for ages, made two pastel drawings of the yellow trees, using the photos as inspiration. And for many months, whenever we saw Norm and Heather, he asked if one day we could all go back to Tuscany. His memory of the adventure successfully and uniquely made the leap from short-term to long-term.

Was this tremendous achievement a result of ordinary healing over time (approaching two years), or perhaps of his intense, unexpected pleasure, rendering it unforgettable? Now, two years further on, his memory has not improved; in fact, it has worsened, and circumstances have made it impossible for me to dare another trip with him. Yet the memories of those ten days in Tuscany and those vibrant yellow trees remain a permanent tribute to the potent effect of strong pleasurable emotions and of the healing power of beauty. ■

Alix Kates Shulman is the author of 12 books, including the iconic [Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen](#). A version of this piece appears in [To Love What Is](#) by Alix Kates Shulman, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC. Copyright © 2008 by Alix Kates Shulman. All rights reserved.