

What I Saw

Summer, late summer. Mosquito weather. We went to the drive-in. We had an old blue Ford wagon.

The first feature had ended. There was a long stretch of cartoons, then intermission. The screen went blank, in a great, dark swath. There were streetlights behind it. We could see the wooden scaffolds that held it up, like looking through skin at someone's skeleton.

My father put the back seat down. I helped him and Mom spread out the sheets and pillows we had brought. Then my sisters came back from the playground, glowing with sweat, pinching each other, giddy with being scared they wouldn't find us.

After a while things got quiet. "Are you asleep back there?" my father whispered. "Girls? You all sleeping?"

The last of the dome lights of the cars around us went out. The darkness closed in more thickly.

My mother said, "I hope I like this one."

"You will," said Dad. "You always like Spencer Tracy."

"But sometimes he's just a big mug. If I don't like it, let's go home. I'll just watch something on t.v. instead."

I had my shoulders against the back wheel hump. I leaned my head at the window. Our breaths fogged the windows, but I could see. The movie was "Judgment at Nuremburg."

This was not a regular war movie! Oh God!

It was Mom who finally turned around and noticed me. She had been slouched down low in the passenger seat. She suddenly sat upright, with a bounce. Her head blocked the screen. I think she must have seen my face in the rear view mirror. I had my hands on my mouth. When I took them away I had bite marks from biting myself to keep quiet.

"Mary Ann! You're awake!" she whispered. Then she said to Dad, "That's it. We're going home."

My father looked at me. "What's the matter?"

"I never knew that part about the war. But they're killing all the Jews. They're taking off their skin. I saw them," I said.

I was too far back in the seat behind my sisters for Dad to reach me. He held up his hand. He made patting motions in the air. He said, "No, no, no. Sweetheart! I was there in that war! You've got it all wrong! This is just a movie! When they turned off the cameras, everyone got up and went home, just like us!"

Mosquitoes were buzzing around in our car. On the screen there was a mound like rubbish at a dump site. It was people. There were hands. There were eyes. I saw them.

"And then God looked the other way," said the voice of the narrator.

My father detached the speaker. He went to hang it on its stand,

and missed, and it dangled down by its wire. We drove out slowly.

The back of our car dragged low along the dirt bumps. The tailpipe was scraping the rocks. The sleeping bodies of my sisters were like sisters in a freight car.

"Do you want me to drive?" said Mom.

"No, godddamn, I do not. I only had two beers," said my father.

We went out the mouth of the drive in to the road. My mother turned and said to me, "Close your eyes. I don't want you looking at this awful movie one more second."

I had never known the difference before between a movie that was a movie and a movie that told the truth. At school, this part was not in the history lessons about the war. But now I knew.

It was still going on behind us. The pictures on the screen were black and white and grainy. Remember this. They weren't acting. They weren't wearing Hollywood makeup. I saw their bones. I saw skulls, hands.

We drove away. All the trees along the roads were full of ghosts, filmy and white in our headlights. Our train had a terrible stink of animals, of manure. Are we going to be lamps? Are we going to be soap? Are we going to be ash trays?