

A THOUSAND SHARDS OF GLASS

INTRODUCTION:
A THOUSAND SHARDS OF GLASS

This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leas'd out – I die pronouncing it –
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of wat'ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds;
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

Shakespeare, *Richard II*, II, i

There is another America and it lies just beneath the surface of myth, adrift on a sea of illusions and imprisoned by implacable ideologies that strangle reason and compassion. We are not in this together.

The real America is a place obsessed with religion but not ethics, with law, not justice. It is neither the democracy nor the capitalist society touted by corporations, politicians and

the media, who perform their own kabuki dance of pretend objectivity when in reality they're another cog in the corporate state, dependent on its largesse. What is most disturbing, however, is the willful indifference and arrogance that has now made many Americans comfortable with injustice, both at home and abroad.

In the 'United States of Salesmen' it matters little what is in one's heart. It is the verbal, animated gestures of patriotism and faith, no matter how insincere, which are the measure of one's 'Americanness' today. Straighten your stars and stripes lapel pin, adjust your tie and, no matter what you see and hear, just remain seated. Forgive me but I prefer to stand and I have never much cared for 'club' pins on my clothing.

America's capacity for self-delusion is equaled only by its hypocrisy, which for decades has allowed us, without a hint of irony, to lecture other nations on human rights while torturing people in our custody. America has long spoken of democratic values while working tirelessly during the twentieth century and before to thwart democratic movements and elected governments that have not coincided with our national interests, which has often meant nothing more than forcible corporate access to other people's property. General Smedley Butler, one of America's most decorated soldiers, who, I assume, was exhausted by the hypocrisy himself, wrote in his 1935 book *War is a Racket*: 'I spent 33 years [in the Marines] ... most of my time being a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer ... for capitalism.'

A great many Americans have never fully understood that the past does not reside in some dead history. It is always being retold, passed between sister and brother, from parent to child, creating new resentments about unaccounted for transgressions. Those histories roll in front of us until we run into them again like an unresolved Freudian dream. Far from being something to be avoided in the future, however, in America this repetition of manufactured and unresolved conflict is for some their bread and butter, or as the gangsters in the movies say just before they shoot their fellow Mafioso, 'This is nothing personal. It's just business.' And business is exactly what it is.

We are not who we think we are or, more accurately, we are not who we sell ourselves as. America is a nationalistic state filled with 'actor patriots' such as the now deified Ronald Reagan who, along with others like George W. Bush and the draft-averse Dick Cheney, represent the so-called 'modern Republican Party' which, by the way, eerily resembles the Mississippi Democratic Party of the 1950s, with all the trimmings such as voter disenfranchisement, shameless bigotry and corruption, and is filled with the type of patriot George Orwell once described as 'the kind of person who is somewhere else when the trigger is pulled'. In such a patriotic country it seems rather odd that less than 1 per cent of the population would serve.

Our patriotism is all performance of course, bread and circus designed at once to divide and mollify an ever under-educated middle and lower class whose attention span and

empathy for others seem to decrease with each new Apple product that is released. For over a half century, America has been a store disguised as a country. As a people we have scarcely moved beyond de Tocqueville's early description of Americans: 'The majority lives in the perpetual utterance of self-applause, and there are certain truths which the Americans can learn only from strangers or from experience'. The self-imposed lack of civic evolution has made for model consumers but poor citizens.

I have read some criticisms over the years asserting that the United States has become just a bunch of second-rate salesmen. I beg to differ. The salesmen and women in these United States of Salesmen are astounding. They have refined deceit and trickery to such an art that they are able to convince a large swath of the middle class that it is in their interests to oppose National Health Insurance and instead put their fate, and those of their loved ones, in the hands of health insurance companies who have a 'pre-existing' interest in denying coverage once it is sold. These brilliant sales people can even sell additional war to an already economically and, dare I say, spiritually broken nation.

These magnificent hucksters have convinced desperate people that 'for profit' universities, which of course are not universities at all, are their best bet to achieve the 'American Dream' that always seems just a bit out of reach these days. Once sold, these good people, trying to better themselves, take out guaranteed government student loans to pay the high tuition fees of the so-called universities, thinking that

they are on their way to a better tomorrow. At the end of their Oz journey the optimistic graduates leave the glittering malls of learning with nothing more than a piece of paper and a mountain of debt. The desperate are often left more desperate and broken than ever.

These artists of deceit have found a way to preach 'privatization' and 'the free market' while bilking the student and the taxpayer at the same time. But really they are not so clever. They are just allowed to run roughshod because a percentage of the public money they receive gets recycled back into the political parties, and then, with the compliance of their paid senators, congressmen and congressional staffs, they all work together to weaken the protections that the salesmen find obstructive to their hustle. These are the best crooks around and they are in the business of arms, drugs, communications and banking and in a medical business that is even more rapacious and savage than what I witnessed as a boy in Chicago.

The salesmen I speak of are not benign: far from it. They have long been the soft terrorists among us, the ones who whisper into the ears of politicians and generals, telling them that it is in the country's interest to invade Chile or back Diem, or kill him. They are the invisible hands that push the computer keys denying a woman with cancer her treatment when they know her claim is valid. They do not wish to tell you what is in your food or water or where the ingredients in the formula that you are feeding your baby come from. They are about secrecy and monopoly and are profoundly undemocratic.

I assume that some of you are bristling at the words already written and I can hear some of you repeating the overused American mantra, 'Why do you have to be so negative?' or, the current conversation stopper, 'Why do you hate America?' In answer to such questions, I would simply state first, that it is not I who is negative but the evidence itself, and secondly, I do not hate America but I am profoundly disappointed and ashamed of the United States and the American people.

To the more sensitive reader who is saying about now, 'But surely there are good, decent and enlightened people in the United States, right?' I would agree, but they are not in charge and they are a minority and it is essential, if we are to evolve, that we first tell the truth about ourselves to each other. Like Caesar's own 'point of no return' we too have crossed the Rubicon, with the tragic consequences of endowing the most corrupt among us power over the essentials of our lives.

No, we are not in this together, but we should be, for John Donne was right: we are all part of the main, whether we know it or not, and the bell finally does toll for thee. Personally, I think it is better to stand together and care for one another than to be a thousand shards of glass that cut and scar for nothing more than a handful of silver.

1 DYING THE AMERICAN WAY

To the living we owe respect,
but to the dead we owe only the truth.

Voltaire

At the time of this writing, in the next room, my dear wife is dying. It is only a matter of hours, I have been told, until the brain tumor that has tried to take her for over five years will finally end her existence and its own, in a rather odd victory.

The beginning of our family ordeal arrived with a whisper. First came the soft, terrifying voices and later the auditory hallucinations that my wife worried might be the first signs of madness. After being assured that was not the case, she found that the hallucinations lessened, only to be followed by a persistent headache that intensified each day.

On a sunny California morning she rose and said that the headache had worsened and then said, 'You don't think I have a brain tumor, do you?'

Seeing the concern in her eyes I immediately hugged her and said, 'Oh sweetie, no. It's probably those allergies of yours

acting up again,' not for a moment thinking that such a horrible thing could be true, for Kris and I still lived on that side of the river where the illusion of past well-being lulls one into a sense of present security. It is finally illness that wakes us from such dreams and in a moment we find ourselves on the opposite bank looking back to see who we once were.

'I think we should go to the hospital,' she said.

So began our descent into the bowels of a brutal and savage corporate medical business, one that would prove nearly as traumatic as the tumor itself. For in America, from the beginning, my wife, as with millions of others, was not looked upon as a patient but rather as a consumer, which meant being seen as an opportunity by some and a liability by others.

In all my travels throughout the world, I have never heard of terminal patients being referred to as customers except in the United States, and that alone speaks volumes about who we are and what we value. It is no wonder then that, from the beginning of Kris' illness, patients, doctors and nurses told me that in America a patient must have an advocate. How strange.

The (second) definition of advocate in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'a person who pleads a case on someone else's behalf'. The word 'pleads' is quite appropriate in our case, for I have had to plead and threaten, trick and yell and cry and yell again and write endless letters and threaten with violence to get what I needed for my wife's care. And we are the supposed 'lucky ones' with insurance.

One can quickly see why someone thrust into such savagery at such a vulnerable time needs an advocate. But why

is the system, and let's be frank, the system is 'us', in such a state? The reason is quite simple: it's the money. No ethics apply, for the idea of ethics is but a quaint afterthought in the United States, something that is said in order to allow people to live with themselves and avoid seeing the monsters they have become. Yes, monsters do exist.

The American medical business is best described as a giant machine with a million moving parts. Each one of those million parts is owned by a different entity, most of whom do not communicate with the other because they are in competition and thus adversarial. It becomes apparent very quickly, once someone is trapped within the system, that all of the talk of 'service' and 'choice' is a constructed fiction for the protection of corporate interests and the promotion of a 'product' which is, at its heart, the illusion of security. The promises made prior to an illness quickly evaporate at the most desperate of times to reveal a labyrinth of conditions, ever-changing rules and small print that not only fails to soothe or elucidate but terrifies instead.

Contained within this machine is an endless Kafka-like nightmare that buries the ill and their families in sheets of paper that no one can understand, resulting in endless calls from strangers demanding more and more money. The faceless people manning the machine reach out their never satiated hands to unendingly ask the ill and dying for more of everything. In this, the United States is unique when compared to any other western industrialized nation.

When a woman from the hospital's business office called to tell me that I owed the hospital more money, I reminded her that a doctor at the hospital had made arrangements for my wife and I not to be bothered again concerning fees. 'And I wish that the doctor had never helped you and your wife with those arrangements,' she said.

I suspect she thought us unworthy of any consideration since I'd questioned so many indecipherable bills, or perhaps it was my audacity at going over her head and expecting that my wife would be treated with empathy and courtesy. During the five years I was dealing with such people, it always felt as though I were in a den of jackals that saw my wife as nothing more than a line item in their budget. Their callousness and indifference filled me with fear, leaving me to think that I needed to be ever vigilant so as to protect my wife from their intrusions and demands while she fought for her life.

The disease that struck down Kris was no one's fault but the dreadful behavior that followed was. This is my opinion of course, but an informed one based upon many unpleasant experiences that never seemed to end and which increasingly robbed my wife and me of the time we had left together. I have often wondered if any of those people ever thought that such abhorrent conduct might put murder in people's hearts. It did in mine.

The machine is also unjust to the point of farce. After not being able to get a claim settled as Mr. Michael Katakis over a five-month period, I resorted to using my appointed title of 'Ambassador' and spoke to a supervisor from our insurance

company, who settled the claim in less than forty minutes. I asked him if he thought it appropriate that as Mr. Katakis I could get nothing done but as Ambassador the claim was settled in a matter of minutes.

‘No, it is not appropriate,’ he answered.

‘What about others who are sick but have no advocate, or are not so persistent, or are not ambassadors?’ I asked, and was met with a silence that thankfully seemed a bit like shame.

The machine is also incompetent. When my wife received calls from the hospice nurses asking if they should come, Kris would assess how she felt and sometimes tell me, ‘You know, I am feeling fairly well today. Let’s not burden the nurse. She’s already spread very thin and this will give her a chance to spend more time with someone who really needs her today.’

Kris did that often. She is a kind and considerate human being but the machine does not reward such behavior. When the time came that Kris and I did need hospice respite, she was declined. Terminal tumor aside, the machine had decided that because Kris had been coping without hospice care for so long, she was not sufficiently unwell to need it now. This suggested to us that going forward we should use all resources available to us, even when not needed, so as not to be denied other services that were. Such is the efficiency and wisdom of the private American medical business.

When the insurance executive was called again by me, the Ambassador, the problem was rectified within thirty minutes but by then, after a week had already passed, Kris was too ill to be moved.

Then, there was the nameless woman who called and asked for Kris only days after she had returned home from her first brain surgery in 2007.

‘This is the [hospital] billing department. May I speak to Kris Hardin?’

‘Kris cannot come to the phone. I’m her husband. May I help you?’

‘Yes, you have an outstanding bill of twelve hundred dollars. When might we receive payment?’

‘As you might imagine things are rather difficult here at present after Kris’ surgery and diagnosis. I have just received something from the insurance company saying it has paid seventy-five thousand dollars, with I think another eighty thousand pending. I don’t have the paper right here.’

‘Yes, but you are not covered for doctors’ fees.’

‘What are you talking about? My wife was told that we were completely covered.’

‘Well, you are completely covered here, but not for doctors’ fees. The doctors here do not accept payment from your insurance company.’

‘But that means we are not fully covered. That is not what we were told by a doctor at the hospital. Are you saying that we are covered and not covered at the same time?’

‘Well, I’m sorry, but you were misinformed. Now the bill is twelve hundred dollars and how would you like to pay?’

‘Yes, we were misinformed and you have misinformed me again. You said that we are covered and then you say “except for ...”. But if there is an exception then you cannot say we

are “fully” covered. Also, we were misinformed by one of your doctors and it would seem it was done to keep my wife in your hospital. I am going to have to check things out before I pay anything because now I’m worried and confused. Are you saying that all doctors’ fees concerning my wife’s treatment will not be covered?’

‘Yes, they will not be covered.’

‘But that means another ten or twenty thousand dollars, right? I need to find that somewhere. The hospital at the University of California, San Francisco takes our insurance, so why don’t you? And why would a doctor misrepresent the facts and not advise that we go to what is one of the best brain tumor facilities in the country, which I have just learned is UCSF?’

‘We are not UCSF and perhaps your wife just misunderstood.’

‘Well, Madam, I have not had brain surgery and I can barely understand you now. When calling in the future, please ask for me. My wife is in no condition to speak to you and I do not want her upset or worried. It won’t help her recovery.’

‘I will make a note, but you will need to pay this bill.’

‘Not until I get to the bottom of this.’

‘Please be advised then that if payment is not received within the time it is due it may be referred to collections.’

‘Ma’am, I have already told you what I intend to do.’

Some days later the business office called again and asked to speak to Kris Hardin. Once again I told them that Kris was not to be disturbed. They must not ask for her. I continued, detailing how we had been billed for mental health in

Bakersfield, California. I told the woman that we had never been to Bakersfield nor had Kris received any mental health assistance from anyone, anywhere and I was not prepared to pay any bill until I understood it. The woman began to negotiate with me.

‘Okay, you don’t owe twelve hundred dollars, you owe eight hundred and fifty. How’s that?’

‘Eight hundred and fifty dollars for what? In the last conversation I had with someone from your office I stated that we had never been told about doctors’ fees, had been misinformed about being completely covered by a doctor at the hospital, that I was going to get to the bottom of the issue, but that my first responsibility at present was to my wife’s care. I also said that my wife was not to be contacted and here you are asking to speak to her days later. Do you understand that she has just undergone brain surgery for brain cancer and can’t even do basic math at present? What is wrong with you?’

‘I’m so sorry and yes, I will make a note, but you will have to take care of this balance.’

One day, unknown to me, Kris came into the room while I was fighting the same people over the same problem that no one could or would solve. After seeing me so upset she said, ‘Perhaps it is time for me to take my life now.’ I jumped up, kissed her and held her as she cried.

The Hippocratic oath speaks of doing no harm and yet so many individuals who are the cogs in this machine are not required to take any oath whatsoever but they should be, for they are indeed doing grave harm. All of the executives

and workers in the insurance and drug companies and in the medical billing offices of doctors and hospitals are somehow excused from the dreadful conduct of the entities they work for, but this is rationalization at its most grotesque. Many of our fellow citizens are like the 'good' Germans now, who follow without thought; the cogs that make the machine work and prosper. They say the predictable things that people engaged in dreadful deeds always say: 'I just work here and I'm following procedures' or 'I have to feed my family' or 'I need to pay my mortgage', as if these needs are any excuse for the brutalization of others.

Sadly, when they or their loved ones cross over to that other bank, as we all will, clarity may finally descend upon them. They will look for kindness and support at their most desperate hour only to find that those around them are the same kinds of people they had once been. It is they who will then be surrounded by the cogs that have taken their places and who will now take everything away. All these workers, our neighbors and friends, are part of the tyranny and inhumanity, for the system itself cannot function without them. We are, in many ways, the disease itself.

Yesterday the hospice nurses were trying to get to Kris, as was the pharmacy, with a delivery of morphine so as to help with her pain. The difficulty was that the nurses and drugs could not reach her until later in the day because of an event here in Monterey and Carmel for the Concours d'Elegance, a fancy auto show of sorts where people with expensive cars smoke cigars, drink, have a grand old time and seemingly

accomplish little beyond hedonism. The old trick of mentioning that 'Some proceeds go to charity' is perhaps employed to help assuage any need for self-reflection. It would seem that, in all the carnival planning, the mayor, police chief and city council had made no provisions for a situation like my wife's.

Here in Carmel we all pretend to be what a lot of American towns pretend to be these days: a community. Carmel is not a community. It is an opportunity. The town sells itself cheaply and often, to any salesman trying to sell one thing or another while using the natural beauty of the area as a backdrop, reducing it to a Hollywood set of sorts. As a result, people like my wife simply don't rate any consideration, not even where death is concerned. It does not matter that my wife, an anthropologist, inspired young people in Sierra Leone to become teachers and doctors or that she helped develop and build a well system so children there could have safe drinking water. It does not matter that she is a profoundly modest and kind human being whose friends adore her. Her qualities of humanity and quiet generosity do not matter either. My dear wife had to suffer for the most banal of reasons, because no one, from the police chief to the mayor to the city council and the business people, seemingly gave my wife, or anyone in a similar situation, a passing thought. There was no malice: it is just who they are. And that is dying the American way. It is just who we are.

In a little while I will go back into our small bedroom filled with friends and I will read to Kris, as we have done for each other for over twenty-five years. This morning I was reading to her from Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* when I came

to the passage where the fox reveals the secret. It remains a secret only to those with closed hearts who, long ago, forgot that the riches we have always possessed are not the ones we hold in our hands, but are each other.

I think I have come to understand that the quality of a life lived is not determined by the contents of a person's pockets but rather by what is contained in their heart. It is what someone has stood for and how they acted or not upon their humanity that finally informs. The fox is right, for what has always been essential is invisible to the eye and we Americans would do well to remember that.

Kris L. Hardin

1933 – 2012

CARMEL – Kris L. Hardin passed away August 21, 2012 after a courageous five-year battle with brain cancer. During that struggle she displayed grace, kindness and wit to her many friends and family. She never lost her humanity or the love and wonder of life.

Kris was a gifted anthropologist and writer who spent years in Sierra Leone, West Africa, doing fieldwork among the Kono people of Kainkordu. All of that research now resides in the British Library Collection, London. Kris was a talented painter as well who only recently shared with family and friends her many oils and watercolors that were done over nearly a decade.

Kris was born in Fresno, CA on March 7, 1953. Following her undergraduate education, she earned a PhD in anthropology from Indiana University, a Fulbright scholarship and Rockefeller and Smithsonian fellowships.

Over the next 25 years Kris, with her husband, Michael Katakis, collaborated on projects all over the world, producing exhibitions and books derived from her work. Her last book was "Photographs and Words", published by the British Library in 2011. In 1999 Kris was elected "Fellow" of the Royal Geographical Society in London. In 2011 she was presented to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth.

Kris was one of those rare and remarkable people blessed with a wide array of talents and with the traits of humility, quiet eloquence and a deep wisdom coupled with a dark, intelligent humor. Her friends were from every walk of life and from around the world. When you were with Kris you simply wanted to just stay.

To the dear friends here, and from around the world who were there when the skies first darkened and then stayed close all through Kris' terrible ordeal, there simply are no words. Finally, to the many health care people, especially Dr. Susan Chang, Dr. Nancy Rubin and Ms. Beverla Miles, who gently cared for Kris and to the selfless and kind Hospice "volunteers" who gave so generously of their time. Thank you all. Your many kindnesses shall not soon be forgotten.

Kris is survived by her mother, Eleanor Hardin of Fresno; her brother, Douglas Hardin, Jr. and her husband, Michael Katakis.



MY TRUE NORTH

Journal entry
29 September 2003
Sounio, Greece

Kris and I have hiked up to the ruins of the Temple of Poseidon and the sea opens up before us. The breathtaking vista makes clear why the temple was built here. If Poseidon, the god of the sea, had lived anywhere he would have lived here. It is magnificent and we are gloriously alone with these ruins created some 440 years before Christ. Kris is sitting on one of the massive overturned columns as she opens her rucksack and pulls out the small watercolor box I bought for her in Paris years before. She is turned sideways and with her large sunbonnet and skirt, in silhouette, she looks like a traveler from another century in one of those old books that you would find in London. From the day I met her, I thought her the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. As a young anthropologist she had just returned from living in West Africa for years. Brains and beauty I had thought at our first meeting when I could not find the words, any words. She was kind as I stumbled. She has always been kind. As I watched her painting, I could not help but think of all of the miles we had traveled together since that first meeting, thousands of miles. I have learned much from her, for she is always engaged in the world wanting to understand that which she does not understand. She is my center, my friend and my True North always guiding and welcoming me home.

— M.K.

*"Wheresoever she was
there was Eden"*

— Mark Twain

Author note: After a brief conversation with someone at Carmel city council, I emailed a copy of this essay and offered them the opportunity to write a rebuttal that would be included verbatim in this volume. No response was ever received.