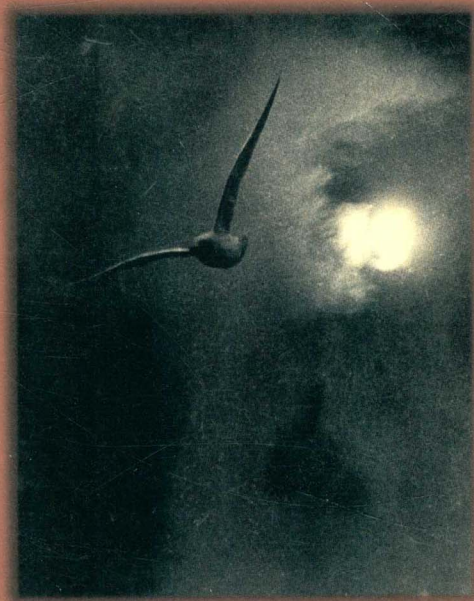


"One of the most bizarre near-death experiences ever recorded . . .

A fascinating tale" —*The New York Times Book Review*



# Raising the Dead

DOCTOR'S ENCOUNTER WITH HIS OWN MORTALITY

Richard Selzer

author of *Down from Troy* and *Mortal Lessons*

Richard Selzer



RAISING THE  
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"The most beautiful, profound, literary account of what it means to be two beings at once: the traveling soul and the patient rooted to the table, the earth, the body."

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RAISING THE DEAD

Richard Selzer is the author of numerous books of essays and short stories, including *Down from Troy*, *Taking the World in for Repairs*, and *Mortal Lessons*. His work has also appeared in many periodicals, among them *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's*, and *Esquire*. For many years a professor of surgery at the Yale School of Medicine, he retired to write full time. He is the recipient of several honorary degrees, a National Magazine Award, a Pushcart Prize for fiction, and a Guggenheim fellowship. He lives with his wife, Janet, in New Haven, Connecticut.

*for Janet*

. . .



*In laying myself down like ash after the flame  
Have I surrendered?  
No, I am sleeping and despite night's power  
Learning like a child that I shall awake.*

. . .

—PAUL ELUARD



# PART ONE

...





. . .

It was in August of the year 1810 that Fanny d'Arblay (née Burney), an Englishwoman living in Paris and the most famous woman novelist of her day, experienced for the first time "an annoyance" in her right breast. Pressing her hand against the discomfort, she felt within its substance a hard lump. For several minutes she reconnoitered with her fingers, then dismissed the finding from her mind. She would not think about it. But the pain would not be dismissed. Within weeks, what had begun as an occasional twinge became a heavy ache from which she was rarely free. Still, out of fear—some might call it

ignorance—Fanny continued to deny its importance to herself as well as to her much concerned husband, Alexandre. Obstinate, she deflected his entreaties to see a surgeon. Months went by during which the tumor enlarged and the pain intensified. At last, Fanny's repugnance for a physical examination was overcome. She would, after all, be examined. It was Dubois, the most celebrated surgeon of France, who was summoned—he, because once before she had been his patient for the successful treatment of an abscess. Dubois looked and palpated and gave the dreaded news that an operation would be necessary but that, having recently been appointed *accoucheur* to the pregnant Empress Josephine, he would not be free to return until the empress had been safely delivered. Fanny was, by now, distraught. Another name was suggested, that of Dominique-Jean Larrey, chief surgeon of the French army and favorite of Napoleon. Having distinguished himself during the military campaigns in Egypt, Poland, and Austria, Larrey had been rewarded with the title of baron by a grateful commander in chief. It was said that Larrey had once cured a Polish woman of a similar malady without surgery.

More terrifying than her pain or the obvious growth of the tumor was the prospect of an operation, for which Fanny's horror was insuperable. To be held down, screaming, and cut open like a melon! Send for Larrey, then, she said at last. But the surgeon proved to be a reluctant consultant, unwilling

to attend her until a letter had been sent by Fanny to Dubois explaining that her severe fright and continued pain made it impossible to endure the delay occasioned by the royal confinement. Larrey had no wish to make an enemy of the great Dubois. With the receipt of that letter and the consent of Dubois, the case of Fanny d'Arblay was made over to Larrey.

From the first visit, Larrey became the repository of Fanny's fairest hopes. A nonsurgical regimen was recommended: compresses, diet, unguents, and rest. Relief at having escaped the knife and some fortuitous lessening of her pain conspired to form Fanny's opinion that her new doctor was the "most singularly excellent of men, endowed with real Genius in his profession." Her sharp novelist's eye also took note of his "ignorance of the world and its usages" and of a certain naiveté that, to the unfamiliar, might give him the appearance of being simple and even weak. "But they would be mistaken," Fanny wrote in her diary. It is only that "his attention having been turned exclusively in one way, he is hardly awake in any other." Over the year of their relationship as doctor and patient, Fanny and Larrey were to conceive the warmest friendship for each other. This was to the great benefit of Fanny, who surrendered herself with full trust to his ministrations, but it may have cost Larrey, who was seduced by his charming and vivacious patient into stripping off the protective carapace that is necessary to any man whose work it is to lay open the bodies of his fellow human beings.

In the weeks that followed, Fanny noted an upswing in the level of her energy. With the lessening of the pain, real or imagined, and no further increase in the swelling, the lesion had appeared to halt its advance and even to show signs of subsiding. Although she still had "cruel seizures," they were shorter and less frequent. Fanny responded with optimism, declared herself better in every way. She was able to go out every day and to receive friends at home. Larrey shared her relief and pronounced himself "enchanted" at her improvement, though apparently not without some misgivings, as he insisted on another opinion—that of Ribes, the first anatomist of the nation—lest his own "excessive desire" to spare his patient the agony of surgery had deluded him. To Fanny's joy, Ribes concurred with Larrey's conservative treatment.

What, then, was Larrey's consternation when he returned at the beginning of September 1811, a year later, to find a marked worsening in the condition of the breast and a deterioration in the patient's general condition. Not only had the swelling advanced, but Fanny's right arm had become useless because of the pain. She required the help of a maid in order to dress. Why had she not summoned him earlier?

"*Et qu'est-il donc arrivé?*" he cried. "What is going on here?" The tumor could not be dissolved, he told her sadly. Surgery would be necessary. Once again Ribes was called in. Once again he concurred, corroborating the bad news. Though she could no

longer even climb a flight of stairs without suffering, Fanny, terrified, pleaded for time. A third doctor, the physician Moreau, was summoned. Might he not suggest an alternative? But Larrey had tried everything already. On the day of Moreau's visit, Larrey and Ribes were also present. Together, all three doctors condemned the patient to the operation that she feared more than death itself. With nowhere to turn, Fanny was trapped. Calling up all her reason, if not her courage, she acquiesced. Not all of her anguish could keep her from seeing the tears in the eyes of Larrey. Would she like to be seen by Dubois once more? he offered. Touched by this expression of modesty, Fanny rejected the offer. No, she told Larrey. If she could not be saved by him, she had no hope elsewhere. But now it was Larrey's turn to plead for time. She should obtain the best advice in France, he told her. She was too esteemed, too valued. "The public will be outraged if . . . if . . . you have not the best we can offer you." Perhaps, he said, Dubois might even now suggest a cure without surgery. At that, Fanny was won over. Send for him! Send for him! she cried. But Dubois, fully occupied with his other patients, was not immediately available. He would come as soon as he could, and, furthermore, he would inform her of the date only on that very same day in order to avoid further agitation.

When the time came at last, after a nightmare of waiting, there were four doctors in the salon of the



house on the rue de Miromesnil outside of which, with sublime indifference, Paris went on being Paris. Once the examination had been completed, Fanny retired from the room to permit them to consult. After half an hour of torment, she was led back in for the verdict. "All were silent, and Dr. Larrey hid himself nearly behind my sofa. My heart beat fast. I saw all hope was over." It was Dubois himself, disturbed by her plight, who pronounced her doom.

"Will there be much pain?" she asked.

"You must expect to suffer," said Dubois. "I do not wish to fool you. You will suffer greatly."

Now it was the anatomist Ribes who spoke. When the time came, she must not restrain her weeping. To do so would have serious consequences. Hadn't she screamed at the birth of her son? asked Moreau. Yes, she told him. She could not help but do so. Why then, there is nothing to fear, he said. Two things more: Monsieur d'Arblay must not be at home during the time of surgery, and Fanny would not be informed of the date until a few hours ahead. It was the one measure they could take to relieve her anxiety, by shortening its worst period.

And now it was the last day of September, thirteen months since her discovery of the tumor. At 8 A.M. a letter was delivered by a young surgeon, Aumont. In it Larrey wrote that he would arrive at 10 A.M., properly accompanied. He charged her to arrange by whatever subterfuge that her husband be made absent from the house. He exhorted her to rely

on his dexterity and experience. Two hours! Larrey again explained that he had deemed it wise to give such short notice to spare her anxiety. With her husband standing by the bedside, Fanny read and reread the letter, her mind darting to think of some ruse by which d'Arblay might be sent away. With all her heart, she wanted to spare this "most loving of men" the sight and sound of her ordeal. Dismissing him momentarily, she sent a note to his employer imploring that an urgent summons call her husband to business and that he be detained until all should be over. That done, Fanny, ever mistress of her household, stifled her fear and told the young surgeon Aumont that she would not be ready until one o'clock. She needed three hours to prepare an apartment for her banished mate; there were nurses to engage, a bed, curtains, heaven knows what, to prepare. Under no circumstances would she be ready until one o'clock. Aumont refused to leave the house and remained in the salon cutting and folding into bandages and sponges the old, fine, castoff underwear he had requested.

At one o'clock, another message came: M. Dubois could not come until three o'clock. Now Fanny, with nothing further to prepare, had only to think and pace. The sight of all those bandages and compresses made her ill. Back and forth, from room to room, she toiled, stilling herself by force of will until she was nearly "torpid."

At last, the clock struck three. There was the clat-

ter of many hooves on the rue de Miromesnil. Fanny raced to the window and saw the cabriolets—one, two, three, four—roll up in quick succession to halt at her door. From each carriage one or two sober-faced men were discharged. With a particular shudder, she recognized Larrey, the man who would, before the hour was up, take up his knife and lay open her body. She retreated to her room. A moment later, the door was opened and seven men in black entered the bedroom of Fanny d'Arblay. It was indignation that roused her from her stupor. Why so many? And without leave! But she could not utter a word of objection.

Once inside, it was Dubois who acted as commander in chief, ordering a bedstead to be placed in the middle of the room, demanding two old mattresses, an old sheet. Fanny was astonished. A bedstead! When Larrey had assured her that an armchair would suffice. She turned to him for confirmation but Larrey kept himself out of sight, at the periphery of the hubbub, his head downcast, his eyes averted. Fanny felt herself trembling, losing control of her nerves. The operating theater having been arranged to his satisfaction, Dubois bid her mount the bedstead. For a moment, she had an impulse to race to the door, the window, and escape. But reason reinstated itself and she stood her ground.

"Please remove your robe," said Dubois, issuing the command *en militaire*. Her robe! She had meant