

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

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“Two Women, Two Windows” A Memoir by Saul Dennis

Less house, more trees. My mother has few maxim-worthy beliefs on the subject of real estate. A child of the Depression and second World War, her people didn't think it wise to “put too much money in bricks.” Even after her father became a man of some means, the family didn't move from their modest Philadelphia row house. (Though my mother's mother would come to possess quite a bit of diamond and platinum jewelry — one ring affectionately referred to as “the flashlight.”)

But if the house-to-tree ratio was a lone commandment, it was also deeply held. Because of this, my brothers and I grew up just outside the nation's capital in a home surrounded by trees. And I grew up looking at those trees and how they pierced the sky, framed by a window above the kitchen sink.

Given the age difference between my brothers and me, Mom and I had the hours after school much to ourselves. There, in the kitchen, as the percolator gurgled and I did my homework, Mom taught me the beauty of the nature beyond the glass, as well as the nature of the world as she saw it.

In spring we marveled at the cascading white of crab apple blossoms. In summer, the riot of green that exploded from branches thick and thin, high and low, spurred by Washington's notoriously fecund humidity. But it was winter that truly held us. Mom has a real thing about heavy, leaden skies — particularly those of the painter J.M.W. Turner. That's a real Turner sky, she'd declare, as a winter storm roiled above the barren treetops.

Back on our side of the glass, instruction was ongoing, regardless of the season. Over oceans of coffee, my love of movies would be stoked. A passion for reading, books, clothes, antiques, cooking, and writing was also ignited, with a particular emphasis on that last one.

Long before me, long before anyone, my mother had the sense that I was a storyteller. The words might be spoken, like the brilliant huckster that was her father. They might be written. But they were there; she knew it. Key to getting them out was the unchanging ritual that began every project, from grade school book report to, much later, col-

lege screenplays, and through the advertising that would be my profession: Sharpen your pencils. Lots of pencils.

Years later, and by now exchanging words for money, I would value this Kabuki for what Mom knew all along — a chance to unconsciously sharpen my thinking. I do it to this day.

How to deglaze a pan, make shrimp cocktail, and the pleasures of Swedish detective novels — these and other truths were revealed before that window, those trees, and the Turner sky beyond.

Eventually, life took me to Manhattan. There I would meet another remarkable woman, who, as fate would have it, also possessed a special window.

This window is in Amagansett, in the home she owned long before we met. It, too, is in the kitchen, above a breakfast table. The trees are different. The sky as well. More broad and malleable, giving hint to the expanse and energy of the ocean nearby.

And here, too, I would receive instruction. Hologrammed out by years of hard work, fierce ambition, and the numbing disappointment of a failed first marriage, I needed it more than I could know.

Watching a storm's first fat flurries I remembered my love of winter. Following the lazy march of summer shadows across the lawn loosened memories, emotions, and even muscles as I finally learned to relax.

The gravity-defying hover of hummingbirds visiting the flowerboxes; the moonlight that turned the whole of the backyard into a giant daguerreotype — the wonders of summer camp were back. So, too, the simple pleasure of sharing coffee, the paper, plans for shopping, dinner, and the day.

Today, the woman who became my wife and I spend as much time as we can by that window. The place where she reawakened me to life, on either side of the glass.

There you have it. Two remarkable women. Two wonderful windows. And me, the luckiest of men.

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