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Lens

“THE SURGERY WON’T COST you anything at all, Mrs. Wilson. In fact, you’ll get paid for your time and inconvenience,” the doctor was talking to my mother, but leaning over me, his light shone into my mostly blind left eye. “And even though there are no guarantees she’ll be able to see, it’s unlikely to do any harm. Her brain has rewired itself to ignore this eye, so aside from the lens being experimental, we’ll also have to work at rewiring the brain to pay attention to the messages coming from this eyeball.”

“Well, I’ll have to talk to her father,” my mother said.

What this meant is that she would decide what was best and then she and my father would argue about it. My father didn’t trust anyone. Doctors especially.

I had been shot in the eye with a BB gun by a cousin when I was four. Trust didn’t come easily to me, either. Our babysitter had lied to my parents when they came home from a funeral and found me screaming in pain. She told them I ran into the corner of a sewing machine drawer. I howled all the way home from Kansas City to Tulsa, unable to tell them what really happened. I didn’t stop crying until I fell asleep. The next day we drove to the Indian Hospital thirty minutes away, where the doctor said it was already healing and nothing could be done. A year later, they thought it best to remove the damaged lens. A thin white halo formed around the torn cornea whose ragged edges mimicked a black hole. My vision was flat; I had no depth perception.

At sixteen, I was a candidate for a surgery that would install an artificial lens capable of sending images from my left eye to my brain.

MY MOTHER AND FATHER argued right after I went to bed. My mother’s exasperation and sharp voice parried with my dad’s silence. Finally, a door quietly opened and closed, the familiar sound of my father leaving to go play guitar at a bar. Fifteen minutes later, I got up and found my mom smoking on the back steps. In the middle of the

yard, fireflies danced with a glow that was yellow and fragile and cold.

“Well,” my mother said.

I didn’t respond.

“Don’t you want to be able to see out of both eyes?”

I shrugged. She turned and looked at me. Her cigarette glowed hot orange in her left hand.

“I can see okay.”

She turned away and put her cigarette to her lips.

“Your father is worried they’ll mess up your brain.”

“Brains are kind of important.”

Her laugh was derisive “How the hell would your father know that?” She tossed the cigarette into the center of the cement block that functioned both as her ashtray and support for the bottom step. It glowed brilliantly as it fell, sparking when it hit the dirt. It landed on dry grass that caught and then flamed out. She lit a new cigarette, and I turned and went back into the house.

IN THE DAY or two before we left Tulsa, mom was wishing she’d planned our trip better. “We could have gone to see the sights,” she said wistfully. Neither one of us mentioned that we couldn’t afford it, really. “Flying all the way to Seattle we’ll only see the ocean and mountains from a plane,” she pined. Neither Mom nor I had ever been on a plane. Any place we’d gone previously we’d walked or drove. Before she’d met and married my dad, she’d escaped Kansas City on a Greyhound bus.

I was enthralled with the view from the air, and I congratulated myself on not pushing my mom away as she leaned into me to see out my window. My kindness didn’t keep me from wrinkling my nose at the smell of cigarette smoke none too discreetly. I tried not to think about all the ways the surgery could go badly. I wondered if my first and only view of mountains and oceans would be from 1,000 feet in the air.

The surgery was scheduled to be in a hospital on a military base. Once we landed, we went straight there.

MOM SLEPT on a couch in my preop room, and I watched some movies on the television mounted high on the wall as she snored. We had both felt cold, and the thin nubby cotton blankets didn’t help much. Nurses came in hourly to check on me. At two in the morning, I was still awake and the floor was quiet. A dark-haired nurse came in

and asked if I wanted something to help me sleep.

I said, "No, thank you." On the screen Bruce Willis watched his wife sadly.

"Have you seen this one?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"It's pretty scary."

I shrugged, and the nurse turned and left.

A few minutes later she was back with a brush, and she asked if she could braid my hair. I shrugged again, my face partially hidden by the rough blanket. My mother had given up on fixing my hair in kindergarten.

The nurse adjusted the bed and I sat up. She neatly divided my hair, parting it down the middle. "Such pretty black hair," she soothed.

"Thank you," I whispered. I wondered if there would be a scar where they would cut into my brain. I suddenly wished I had said no to the surgery, that I had told my father I agreed with him and that I didn't want this to happen. I wished I could call him and talk to him.

"Are they going to cut my hair?" I asked the nurse, not taking my eyes off the screen.

"No, sweetie, I don't think so. They'll go in through a sinus passage."

On the television screen a girl threw up, her face pale and terrifying.

With the remote, I turned off the television. I closed my eyes and felt the brush glide gently through my hair. Her fingers spread the strands of my hair apart and then wove it into plaits. I drifted off as she worked on the second braid.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I was awakened and hooked up to an IV drip. My heart beat hard in my chest. Before I closed my eyes, I wondered if I would open them again.

My mother was sitting next to the bed reading a book when I opened my eyes. Books were her second addiction, the one that wouldn't give me cancer. I watched her. She was totally engrossed, lost in an interior life I didn't have a clue about. Behind her chair stood two little girls: one a toddler clutching a plush white rabbit with black eyes, while the other looked five or six years old. They held hands and watched me. My left eye itched and I began to try to lift a hand to rub it. My hand was fastened to the bed rail and moving it caused a loud clanging. My mother jumped up and came to the bedside, saying, "Stop. They don't want you to rub your eye."

I closed my left eye, focusing on opening my right. There was only darkness. I panicked.

“Why can’t I see?” I cried. I felt like the right part of my head was newly missing.

My mother was pushing the call button. “They want you to use the left one. Train your brain to see out of it. Calm down; there’s a bandage on your right eye.”

“It hurts. It itches.” I opened my eye to see the two little girls staring at me.

My mother stepped back out of the way as an orange-haired nurse came in.

“Settle down,” the nurse said sharply.

She gave me two pills and some water. She removed the bandage from my right eye and her face suddenly seemed to wear two different expressions when I looked at her. She was smiling and frowning at the same time. It was like two transparent masks had been placed on top of each other. I glanced over at the two little girls and they were like gauze. They watched the nurse fearfully. The nurse replaced the tear-soaked bandage with a clean one, covering my right eye. Her smiling face disappeared. I glanced over at the little girls and they became solid. The older one walked up to the bed.

“We’re going to bandage this eye, too, but don’t touch it,” the nurse commanded. “It has a lot of healing to do.” She covered my left eye. I felt the IV tube move and suddenly my arm grew colder with a rush of new fluids. I was suddenly sleepy. “It’s best if you rest now,” the nurse said, pleasantly.

I felt a small cold hand reach out and touch my arm. “Sometimes,” the little girl whispered, “when she gives you drugs you die, like me. But you’re going to be okay, so don’t worry. Me and Bea are watching out for you.” I fell asleep feeling a second small hand patting me.

THE BANDAGE STAYED on until the next day to keep me from clawing the new lens out. I could feel it, blood pulsing around it, swelling as if my eyeball might force the foreign object out. In the meantime, my brain had noticed whatever they had done in there and ached as if it, too, had a foreign object the size of a marble to force out. I begged them to let me sleep through it but dreaded the nightmare of the two dead girls returning. They didn’t visit my dreams again, though. My mother kept patting my arm when I would wake up moaning. At that

point the pain had spread, my whole body had become sensitive, and I yelled at her to go sightseeing and leave me alone. I was grateful I couldn't see her reaction. I didn't know what I would do if she had the second cruel face I thought she might. Pain made me a wild animal who wanted to crawl into its burrow and die alone.

When the orange-haired nurse came back on in the evening, the two dead girls showed back up. I felt their light cool touch as the familiar voice warned me she was going to remove the bandages and place drops in my eyes. Her voice was suddenly sharp when I wouldn't open them, keeping them shut, nauseous at the idea of seeing the wan figures in my room.

"Do it," whispered the older girl right next to my ear. "If you're difficult she'll hurt you." The girls had placed their little hands on my body, and the pain seemed to channel to them and lessen.

I opened my eyes. The two-faced nurse was more horrifying than the dead girls on either side of me watching me with concern.

"How's your vision?" the nurse asked. I heard a door open and glanced over to see the surgeon walk in. His face was one solid expression.

He held a small light and asked me to follow it with my eyes. I did. I tried to avoid the nurse's frowning/blank face as she stood behind the surgeon. He placed his hands on my head, feeling for odd bumps and contusions. "How's the pain?" he finally asked.

A tear slid down my nose from my unimproved eye. "It hurts a lot," I whispered.

"Where?"

"My eye feels like it has a rusty needle in it. My whole body hurts."

He nodded. "Perfectly normal. We'll keep you sedated so you don't hurt yourself touching that eye. Speaking of. . ." he held up a chart of letters of varying sizes. He covered my right eye with his hand.

"Read the fifth row, just above the green line." Behind the chart I saw only the nurses's grotesquely frowning face.

From behind me I heard a man's voice whisper, "Lie." He sounded like my dad.

I pretended the line was as blurry as it would have been before the surgery. I spoke as if I was hazarding a guess. "They look like little black shapes. Boxes and circles."

The surgeon frowned. "Well, that's disappointing. What about the top line?"

“A large black box.”

“H’m, wonder if it’s the lens or the brain not working. Look around the room. No, don’t sit up yet.”

Now, as I scanned the room, I saw a man in an olive-colored uniform, his skin brown, his hair black, like mine. He stood at the head of my bed watching me. He smiled gently and placed a finger to his lips.

“How’s your distance vision?” the doctor prompted. “Any clearer?”

The man was Indian like my dad. Like me. He shook his head warningly at me, and to the doctor I said, “No. I’m sorry.”

The doctor sighed and turned to the nurse. “Well, let’s send her to X-ray.” Then he turned back to me. “We’ll see what this brain is doing. I’m going to cover your eye again,” he warned.

I nodded.

“Nurse Stemmons, will you come with me? I need help with the next patient. And you’re so good with children.”

I shuddered as I heard her demure, “Thank you, Doctor.” The door clicked shut behind them.

“I hope I didn’t frighten you,” the man said quietly.

I was afraid to speak, afraid to be heard.

“Smart girl.” The man’s voice was warm. It rolled with the sound of Oklahoma. Even without seeing him, I would have guessed he was Cherokee, like my dad. They had a lilt that spoke with the memory of another language. “Turn on the TV so as they won’t hear you.”

I extended my hand out, reaching for the remote. It came on lightly, and I found the volume dial and turned it up, enough to cover my voice.

“You know you’re an experiment. What you don’t know is you’re not the first. They did this to me and it drove me mad. Not seeing the ghosts but seeing the living—” he paused.

“The evil,” I suggested.

“And if they know you can see me, and Bea and Kitty, you’ll see more evil than you can stand. That nurse is just the beginning. The really terrible thing will be the people who will experiment on you and aren’t evil.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, there are people who are damaged and dangerous. But then there are people who don’t feel anything. They’re just doing their job. The kind of people that would have followed the law in Nazi Germany just because it was the law, not because they cared one way or the other.”

“What should I do?” I whispered. “Should I pluck out my eye?” I wondered seriously.

The man let out a low whistle.

“I tried that. When that didn’t work I ended the experiments in a more drastic fashion.”

We were both quiet a minute.

“But, shoot, all you have to do is lie to them. Don’t ever tell anyone what you can see. They won’t believe you about people like that nurse, anyway, and they’ll fill you up with drugs to make that go away.”

I felt him place a warm hand over my left eye.

“You’d look cool in an eye patch,” he suggested.

I considered this. Wearing a pirate patch in high school. The alternative was madness. How long could I walk around high school, seeing the teachers and other students for who they were?

As if being a teenager wasn’t hellish enough.

“This is a hard world for someone who sees clearly,” I said.

“It’s a hard world either way,” he said.

“Who are you?” I said quickly, feeling the warmth over my left eye subside, reaching out for the hand I couldn’t see.

The television remote clattered to the floor, bouncing at the end of the cord and changing to a random channel.

“Who are you?” I shouted.

I heard the door open and then close, quietly.

“Who’s who?” Nurse Stemmons demanded.

I froze.

“Who’s who?” she repeated.

“I thought I heard someone,” I whispered.

“You’re not going to be any trouble, are you?”

I felt the light hands of Bea and Kitty touching me again.

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to be any trouble at all.”