

THE PAINTING

By Joseph Christiana

I'm blind. Stone cold blind. Blind as a bat. Can't see these words I'm typing right now, can't see the keyboard they're being typed on and I sure as hell won't be able to see my wife's disgusted expression when she looks over these pages for typos. God bless her.

I haven't always been blind. Never had to wear glasses, never had a problem with my eyes. My eyesight's always been good. Truth is, I've always prided myself on the keenness of my eye sight. I remember as a kid being able to make out the words my aunts and uncles couldn't see on the street signs that were a ways down the road yet. "Wow, how'd you see that from so far away?" they'd say. And I'd kind of smile, glowing inside with some silly coincidental sense of achievement.

That pride I attributed to my eyes increased a hundred times when I started drawing. I guess about the age of twelve. Little sketch portraits of rock stars. Then still-lives of skulls and flowers and paintings of beat up trumpets that caught the light real nice. Spent more than half the day in the art room in high school. Got stoned, hung out in the art room and painted self portraits. "You have a good eye," my art teacher would say. Always wore funny hats, that one. Artsy hats with plastic fruit on it. "A good eye." That warm feeling. Won me a couple of contests. They'd put up the pictures in the local colleges. First prizes. My eyes.

One thing led to another. Art school, internships, the real world. Built a professional career on my goddamn eyes designing and illustrating exhibits, these monstrous monuments to capitalism they erect at conventions and tradeshow. My opinion, they're eye sores, but those committees get their corporate daddies to shell out money hand over fist for them and I take home some of that money, so what the hell. I draw for them. Makes them happy. They say, "Job sold. Half a million. Congratulations." That same glow. But a little weaker. Much weaker.

Most people when they go blind, go by degrees. Little by little. They see shades or they can see things on the periphery-- or not on the periphery, I forget -- and slowly, day by day, it goes, like lights dimming in a movie theater. That gives you time to get used to the idea, say your goodbyes to the light and all that.

Not me. Mine came in flickers. And then blocks. One minute I was 20/20, next black. No in between. Like throwing a switch on and off for me, not easing a dimmer.

A couple of weeks ago, driving down to Dover to pick up paints. I didn't just do industrial design with my eyes. I'm was a painter. I shoulda said that already. My wife called me a secret painter because I didn't show anyone my canvases. Hadn't for a long time, anyway. I think she means I don't show anyone my canvases to get money out of them. I sell my eyes at work, I tell her. My private eyes are mine. That doesn't make too much sense to her. Only makes half sense to me, but that's the way it is. One day I'll put the paintings in one of those fancy-pants art galleries down there in Soho next to the stores with the \$900 pair of sandals and those skinny-ass models walking around with long pink cigarettes. I don't know. One day. Maybe. But that day I was down in Dover headed to the art store, it's in the basement of this little rinky-dink art school run by some guy who once did these pictures for trash romance novels. Painted guys look like Fabio, half-naked with women limp in his arms like wet towels. There's a cute little punk girl

with green and white striped stockings running up to her ratty black shorts working behind the counter. Always reading something like Henry Rollins poetry books. This one, you can tell, she goes a long way to make herself look like she's ragged and angry, but in truth she cares a whole lot what she looks like. You can tell by her teeth. She has these sparkling white teeth. Dentist's kids' teeth. You can change your clothes when the baby-ticking-biological-suburban-nesting-yearning-alarm starts ringing, but you can't change your teeth. And her hair, it's shiny and clean and healthy, even though it's purple like grape soda. Anger is a form of desperation and these punks, they don't know what it's like to be desperate. Punk is just a symptom of being over-privileged. Anger, rebellion, indignation, the kind we have in America, they're privileges of the middle class. But I like to see what's rattling in these heads so I ask her about her Rollins book while I load the yellow ochre and cerulean blue tubes on the counter covered with little doodles all over the surface. Bored college kids. She looks at me cock-eyed, like I'd know anything about Henry Rollins kind of look and I remember seeing Black Flag in LA back then... and let me tell you, I'm thinking, punk girls are just like hippie chicks when you get right down to it, and they're like the sorority girls too, and the jock girls as a matter of fact, so cut the shit. But don't say any of it. Except.

"Cut the shit," that escapes from my mouth. Under my breath, but it's out there all the same.

"What?" she asks, all pissed now.

"Nothing."

It's easy to see through the charade when you get the costume off and they're naked with their fleshy little bellies and imperfect tits in the moonlight, remembering my college days as she rings up the paint.

When I handed over the money, that's when it happened, a flash of black. No dizziness, just black. Empty black. Guess it lasted for about five seconds. It felt like a year. Five horrifying, terrifying seconds of desperation. The kind where thoughts of suicide emerge like instinct. Must of looked like I was on acid or something to the punk rock girl.

"You ok?" snotty.

"Yeah." The world came back. The punk girl staring.

Throw some bills on the doodle counter and head out as fast I can, not knowing what the fuck is going on.

"Your stuff," she said.

"Yeah, my stuff."

I used to think everyone else was blind and I was the only one who could see. My wife says it sometimes, and it's true, I have this little problem with pride and arrogance and superiority and conceit and self-importance and narcissism. Short guys, a lot of them, they have inferiority complexes because they see things from a little lower than the rest of us. Artists, they have superiority complexes because they see things a little higher. Or aspire to. Or pretend to. That's their job, you can't blame them. When Dante went through purgatory and hell he was the first to admit his problem was pride. Humility is hard to come by when you're busy constructing heaven and hell and everything in between. That's maybe why he started in hell first. To get humble.

"Eyes are funny things," I said to my wife. "I'm having trouble getting the world to conform to my vision of it."

She finds me exasperating sometimes. Me too.

I had just had a huge project sell at my real job and it made a load of money for the company, and for me too, and I was feeling really disgusted so I took a couple of weeks off to focus everything I had into that canvas. The last refuge of a successful man. It was about thirty feet long and twelve feet high. Had to stretch it across the side of my house and set up a roll-up tarp in case it rained. Didn't want the painting to wind up in a puddle of color on the ground like Bluebeard in that Vonnegut book and that goddamn potato shack.

The first session lasted eighteen hours. No breaks except to use the bathroom and drink the water my wife brought out to me every once in a while. She was worried. The look in my eyes, what I told her I set out to do. I can tell when she's worried, she walks around a lot, peeking her head around corners, doing idle chores, does a lot of gardening. But she knows me well enough to leave me be, to ride out the storm. This storm was to last a long time though and we both knew it.

"How long. What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't know. Long as it takes. Maybe a week."

The images came clear and strong. Stronger than life it seemed and the first black out came two hours in. It lasted maybe ten seconds. I was on the step ladder. One minute I was staring into a baby's sketched eyes beneath my brush. Next minute black. I grabbed onto the ladder and cursed myself. How could I be so weak? What was wrong with me? I've been drinking too much coffee.

Then as quick as she disappeared, the baby was back. The light was back. I painted into the night with the floods I got at Home Depot just for the occasion burning, and the neighbors peeking out though their blue TV lit Venetian blinds wondering what the hell am I up to now.

I put the blindness out of my head until it was the mother around two o'clock in the morning. She was holding the baby and wham, black again and again I was on the ladder except this time it lasted for more than a half a minute. I was scared. I need sleep, I thought. So when my vision switched back on, I shut my eyes, slept at the foot of the ladder at the foot of the painting. A couple of hours, I thought. Back to work.

My wife caressing my head, running her fingers through my hair with a cup of coffee for me, looking at me with something that was like pity. But wasn't exactly. I always wonder how her eyes see me. But I see her. The soft morning sunlight in an angel's halo on her hair. And that heavy sweet smell that comes from the white flowers that grow on the hedges. They last about two weeks in the early summer. Can't get smells into a painting, except for that oil. But her eyes. I can get them in there. I got to my feet. Picked up a brush.

"Have some coffee."

"No coffee." I said.

Men with brooms, soldiers, gods. All circled around the baby's eyes. My wife's eyes.

The composition was blocked in by noon and some of the detail was emerging, like chiseling away stone, except in reverse. Building up. It happened again when the last bit

of white was covered. Five minutes of black. I fumbled in the dark. Panicked. Kicked something and hurt my foot. I must have been cursing too, my wife came running out. Now just a voice in the blackness.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Urgency .

"I'm ok. Go inside."

"Don't tell me to go inside. What is it?"

"My eyes."

"Your eyes?"

I didn't have to answer. She saw the blank look. Must have.

"My god."

The light came back to my eyes. There she was, beautiful. Her eyes are vacuums of sorrow, reflecting a pain so deep makes you shiver to look at her. She paints her nails black.

"How long? When?"

"Yesterday. Just black outs. Everything goes black."

"Take you to a doctor."

"Not now. If it happens again."

The talk went on like that for awhile. I promised her next time it happened, I'd get it checked out. Have them scan my brain or something. I went back to work. She relented with protest.

I was painting stars, the way they fade in the early morning light and you know the sun is soon. And it happened again, the blackness. This time ten minutes. Maybe more. I remembered the Pit and the Pendulum when my father read it to me when I was ten and imagining what it must have been like, the rats crawling on you in the dark. Not knowing. I dropped to my knees and I prayed. It was sort of a prayer. Though I don't think it was to God exactly. I don't know God. In the dirt, I didn't fold my hands. I confessed I had no power. I had no power over it and there was nothing I could do. I was nothing in the dark. Nothing without my vision. The light came back.

In the evening, the neighbors were gathering around. Looking at this big crazy painting and the back of my head. They were stand-offish at first, standing back, on the corners of the street, like they were just out walking their dogs. Then they got braver, slowly. Stood closer. Looking into it. Looking for something in it. Searching. Some of them sat down on the lawn. Some brought green plastic chairs and something to drink. I was vaguely aware of whispering. But for some reason no one asked me about it. No one had those vapid comments you might expect. Maybe my wife told them not to say anything. Maybe they just knew.

She brought out a sandwich and some hunks of Swiss cheese and crackers and a glass of the Chianti we love to drink together. She gasped when she looked up at it. But still she didn't say anything. You'd never find a woman like her in a million years.

"I love you."

I love her too. She saves me from forgetting who I am. She placed the plate and the glass on the paint shelf of the ladder. I looked up to survey what I had done for the day, the details breathing life into it. And again black. I ate in total darkness, fumbling for my

food and drink, but I pretended like I was contemplating the canvas. Never faced the neighbors.

It was black now, but I started to see the painting in my head just the same. It emerged from somewhere I don't know and I went over every line, every stroke. The colors. All coming out of the black And in my mind, it was finished.

It went on all next day. The blackness getting longer and longer. The light shorter and shorter. Someone flicking on and off the switch. Maybe I should have been angry. But I wasn't. I just waited.

During a blind spell a kid, maybe ten years old, rolled up to me. Sounded like he was on a skateboard.

"Hey mister, you're standing in a puddle of red paint."

"I know, kid." Lying.

Sometimes when it was black the image came and I'd study it. Sometimes it was just black. Sometimes I sensed her, standing there watching while I pretended to survey the canvas. Sometimes she watched while I choked back sobs.

That night, after the neighbors went back into their homes and it was quiet and it was just me and the painting and the blackness, I got that sensation of being unconscious and hyper-aware at the same time, that feeling of being bigger and smaller than you really are, like in that instant before you fall asleep. On the edge of a dream. An hour, maybe more of black and watching it rise up from the black, and then a minute of painting. Attacking, with meticulous precision. Not thinking really. Just serving it. A puppet serves the hand. And then I knew, finally, after a ten second glimpse of light and a three hour spell of black, that my last view of the world was coming, and I could feel on my back that the sun was coming up too, sideways though the trees and I heard the door open and my wife coming out and standing there knowing that I was blind.

"It's finished," I said. "Once I look at it one last time." A painting is not finished till you see it. When you see it, it's like it become detached from you and you're not a part of it anymore. Then it's finished. Maybe it's dead then. Maybe it has to die for the painter so it can live for others. Maybe that's silly.

But she knew what I meant. She took my hand in hers and the light came to my eyes. It came and before me I saw my house, and the orange sky and the trees and my lawn, and the neighbors on the sides of us, but the canvas before me was blank, not a single stroke of color on it. Nothing. And I turned to my wife in wonder. There was a single tear running down her cheek, but she wasn't looking at me, she wasn't pitying my blindness. She was looking at the canvas and crying.

"It's beautiful" she said.

That's the last I saw of the light.

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