

LOVE IS BLIND
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The man's finger slowly traced the curve of the young lady's cheek. Had he been able to see, he would've loved the smile it brought to her face. But he could feel it through his fingertips. What he couldn't feel was the purple birthmark starting above her right lip, extending up nearly to her right eye. His hands weren't nearly as sensitive to the blemish as was the object of his love.

He whispered in her ear. "I love you so much. The fact I can't see you doesn't hinder my knowing how beautiful you are."

His lack of sight also didn't prevent Jason from crossing the city. His Seeing Eye dog allowed more freedom of movement than his cane had. He just had to move slowly. Apparently not caring that it cast doubts on his manhood; he stopped several times to ask for directions. A doorman, right before he arrived, gave him sight dependent directions before realizing his mistake. Despite obstacles, Jason made it to his appointment on time. The sign beside the door read, "Sight for Sore Eyes."

"Visual reality may not be quite what you imagine."

At least the doctor wasn't catering to him. Jason hated that.

"It has to be better than what I have now."

"Perhaps not! I can't tell, having never been you. But I'm curious. You've been blind your whole life. Our procedure, while amazing, carries a definite set of risks. We're proud of what we've accomplished, but we rarely get patients like you. Most who've already adapted as well as you, don't bother. You've done well your whole life. Why now?"

"I've heard of colors all my life. I hear the sunset described, the color of someone's eyes, and I've no framework to understand any of it. I feel like a two dimensional person in a three dimensional world."

"Suppose the procedure fails? It does sometimes, you know."

Their conversation was interrupted by the young lady entering the office. She would've been very attractive were her face not terribly marred by a birthmark. Jason introduced Eileen proudly as his fiancée. The girl looked the doctor directly in his eyes, despite her own being slightly crossed. Her voice sounded like music as she greeted the doctor.

Jason answered the last question. "I'd be blind then, just as I am now. But what if it works? We're getting married in four months, sir. When I lift the veil off my bride, I want to be able to look in her eyes."

Suddenly concerned, the doctor asked to speak to Jason alone. Eileen rose to step outside. Before she did, she favored the doctor with a grave and serene gaze. It seemed she was looking deep into his soul.

Alone, the doctor resumed. He asked Jason to describe his lady. Jason could've talked for hours, but the doctor stopped him after a few minutes. Everything the boy said described his woman's character. After meeting her, the doctor had to agree. She was indeed a beautiful soul. But what did the boy think she looked like?

"Her mind, her heart, her voice, and her love are beautiful. She must be beautiful physically as well."

The doctor was very worried. Seeking time to think, he described the procedure. Essentially, they embedded small photo-sensitive plates onto a patient's retinas. If the optic nerve still functioned, the plate was wired directly to it. If not, they installed conductive nano-fibers to the nerves leading to the brain from behind the optic nerve. Lenses in each eye were replaced with very powerful artificial ones to focus incoming light on the retinal plates. Many patients reported actual sight within a week or so afterwards.

The risks were these: The mind wasn't used to such signals. It would act to protect itself from strange input, if not given a chance to adjust and adapt slowly. Moreover, the lenses focused light, just like a magnifying glass. In a typical situation, that focus fell on living cells and the eye adjusted as needed. In his case, the light would strike metal plates that retained heat. Should Jason forget and stare

directly at the sun, he could count on two small hot plates in his eyes permanently frying nerves behind them. He'd never get a second chance.

Jason smiled. "I've never seen the sun. I guess I'll trade not looking at it for seeing everything else. When can we do the operation?"

The doctor sighed. "The receptionist will have you sign a waiver of responsibility. It indicates you understand the procedure and find the risks acceptable. Then you'll come back in three days for testing. If that goes well, we'll see you back the following week. Maybe you'll see us as well."

Jason was jubilant rejoining Eileen. He just knew the procedure would work. For some reason, she seemed reserved, but genuinely happy for him. She rubbed absently at her birthmark as he spoke of how happy he'd be to see her, his lovely bride. She reminded him beauty came from within. He told her she deserved a whole man. She declared she loved him just as he was. She really sounded worried, but he was too excited to notice.

They walked together, hand in hand. They played a game only lovers in their circumstances could appreciate. She would obliquely describe for him what she saw, while he tried to guess what she was describing. A row of spears, pointed at the sky, was a cast iron fence. He missed the dragon crouched behind school children with teeth bared, until she acknowledged it was plastic and he heard children on the playground. Knowing they were near the library, he easily identified crouching lions threatening book lovers as stone statues guarding the building. The man stuffing a "hole" pastry in his mouth was outside a donut shop.

Whenever possible, as he solved each riddle, he experienced it by touch. The music of her voice and laughter made the day marvelous. The game was even more enjoyable with the poignant realization that it was the last time they would play it. His operation was the next day. Afterwards, he wanted to wait three weeks to see her. The first time would be when he lifted the veil for their first kiss as man and wife.

Jason woke up in the darkened room, extremely nervous. The bandages were removed. He looked around in wonder afterwards. The doctor was busy testing his sight in various ways. Hand eye coordination was bizarre at first. His mother watched him as attentively as he watched her. When the doctor finished satisfying himself with the procedure's outcome, he asked the young man's thoughts. Jason unfortunately looked at his mother when he answered.

"Well, people aren't as pretty as I thought they'd be."

He was delighted to see the sudden frown creasing his doctor's face. He'd never seen one of those before either.

The young man walked alone, needing no guide. His eyes could direct his steps. He experienced not only the sounds, but the sights of his city. He watched a group of young people mock an old woman behind her back. As he continued, beautiful buildings were gradually replaced by ones covered in graffiti and grime. Beautiful cars once identified by sound alone, were marred by rust and dents. Spears to the sky had peeling paint. The fearsome dragon was coated with pigeon droppings. And majestic lions did their best to ignore trash and debris around their paws.

Seeking beauty, he walked in the park. The swans on the pond were so graceful. Flower gardens were brilliant in the rich sunlight. The children playing wore brightly colored clothing and laughed beautifully. Then he saw sudden hatred on a mother's face as she slapped her child. Wincing, he turned away to see the scab covered man, sleeping on newspapers below the bench. Tears flooded his eyes, ending the barrage of sensations.

A sober young man requested another meeting with the eye doctor.

"Well, you warned me, didn't you?"

"I tried. Every sense, every gift comes with blessings and curses. There's beauty in the world, but there's pain in it as well."

The young man sat in silence, head down.

The doctor gently asked. "Isn't anything better than you imagined it would be?"

Jason's face lit up momentarily. "The flowers are incredible. And the sky. Wow! Did you know it changes color from day to day, sometimes hour to hour? And the sunset, did you ..."

Jason began laughing. "Yeah, I guess you know that, don't you?"

The doctor smiled. "It's nice to be reminded every now and then though. Now, why don't you tell me what's really on your mind."

Jason sighed. "I'm getting married in two days, doctor. Would you tell me the truth? Is Eileen as beautiful as I imagine her?"

The doctor looked out the window. A month earlier, Jason never would have seen the tears welling up in the man's eyes.

"If all you ever knew of her was the beauty of her soul, you'd be blessed indeed. Nothing else compares to that. Nothing is as beautiful as we imagine it to be, except maybe God. Be careful that your dreams don't become crushed by the weight of your expectations."

Jason stood and started to shake the doctor's hand. He changed his mind and drew the startled man into a hug.

"Thanks for being truthful, and for everything else you've done."

The young man in the tuxedo walked down the steps of his apartment to wait for the taxi. The cane he carried was that of a blind man, though he clearly didn't need it. When he saw his ride approaching, he looked carefully around him. He gazed intently at the sky before stooping to pick a flower. As the taxi came to a stop, he laid the bloom carefully on the grass. He sighed deeply.

Then he turned to stare directly at the noon sun.

At the church, he left his dark glasses on. The identity they lent him was who he was. When his pastor told him he could kiss the bride, he had no problem finding her lips. His finger slid through her tears as he traced the curve of her face, and whispered.

"You'll always be beautiful to me."