



## EYES

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At ten o'clock on a Saturday morning a woman stands in the phone booth on the far corner of the square. She is calm, precise, coolly observing that beyond her glass box it is April: sun warming moist earth, tulip and dandelion leaping into splendid bloom. Sweet juices stirring, in the maple over her head, in the robin shouting to his mate.

A precarious, unsettling day. The phone in her hand reeks of tobacco, of some heavy male scent of shaving lotion or cheap cologne. The robin shouts, the soft air trembles with anticipation and she stands impaled upon a musky reminder of masculine presence, so invaded by her sense of the previous occupant that he might be lingering there in the booth with her. Body touching hers, hands. . .

She moves sharply, knocks her purse from its unsteady perch on the small shelf, bends to pick it up; nose and eye are confronted by the damp spot on the floor. Disgusting. What kind of man...A picture presents itself and she averts her mind from that vision with delicate haste, fixing it instead upon her dislike of telephone booths, cold in winter and hot in summer, filled with distasteful reminders that others have been there before her and left traces of themselves behind, fingerprints and lipstick smears and smell of humanity never tidied away.

She turns again, listening to the long rings at the other end of the line, and thinks of the remaining errands she wishes to do, of the endless peaceful solitary day tomorrow. Of the sister she is calling, a last link to the child her mother wished her to be. The note received yesterday said Sister I am ill; nonsense, thought Ellen, reading it. Yet here she stands, trapped in this repulsive booth. Resentful of her sister's tug on withered ties. Angry that she forgot to call before she left home but cannot forget it now. Furious that she almost believes in spite of repeated evidence that her sister can take to bed at will, inventing terrible new diseases that will kill her if she is not able to talk them away. Helpless before the childish compulsion: I must call or she will die.

Ring, ring. Has the woman gone away? Or is she really ill, unable to reach the phone and left alone by that lean gray shadow she calls husband? Anxiety stirs, guilt lifts its head, and Ellen moves uneasily as she wrenches her mind away once more. She searches for any distraction and finds none; she stares very hard at the nearest architecture, trying out varying perspectives, following a line around to its final conclusion and then letting her eye jump back to the beginning. The building before her is cream colored, roofed in red shiny tile, the fat chimney a deeper, rougher red. Next door a gray cinder-block structure...

Her sister's voice is a thin pale hello. She does not ask where Ellen is or what she is doing, only waits for her to say how are you. In answer she begins a recital of her symptoms as though she has placed the recorded disc of her illness on the turntable and begun to play it, a Fugue for Groans, Sighs, and Whimpers, with Obligato for Listener. It is a definitive work, pains here, a chill there and a bit of fever next, building slowly to a climax of suffering. Are there false notes, discordant intimations of health? Ellen cannot tell; perhaps her sister does not know either.

Hmmm. Yes. Too bad, Ellen says. Nothing more is required of her. She is an ear, disembodied. If the two women were together there would be more, a pillow for Ellen to tuck into a particular spot, a glass of water to fetch or a shade to adjust. Squeezes and pats from her sister's cool dry hand as Ellen leans down to pretend loving care. A sad reproof that she does not return the pats and squeezes, that she is so cold, so shut away from others. A wistful regret that Ellen has never married. Oh Sister, do you not like men? No, sister dear, and I think rather less of women.

Listening, not needing to hear, Ellen falls into soliloquy. I do not like people who sag on me, she thinks. Fall on me like limp featherbeds, smother my life with their own. My mother was like that. A soft white squidge of damp emotion, leaving a trail of tears and sighs on everything she touched. Like a gentle snail she laid her track of suffering across all my days. And died. I did not believe she was ill.

How does that shadow of a man stand it? Not like my father. Excused himself from our lives very early, took what he wanted and went his way, men often do. Who should mourn that loss? Mother, her easy sorrow over him, even dying her eyes leaking tears at the mention of his name. What is it people get from one another that makes them do such things? A puzzle I do not wish to solve; I am pleased with my life as it is.

The complaint is continuing in her ear. Oh Sister, it says, you do not know how I suffer. Anger and boredom collide in Ellen's mind and she looks outside her box once more, turning 90 degrees to see the diagonal sidewalk that cuts cater-corner across the pale green lawn of the town square to the courthouse at its center. Pushing his boy-sized bicycle along the walk, looking straight ahead like the Indian on a buffalo nickel, here comes the old man of the square. He is as much a part of it as the fountain of Neptune and the greeny-black cannon and the brick street where the watermelon market used to be. He is always alone; he sits on a bench near the fountain or wheels his bicycle here and there, mounting with a

ponderous dignity when he reaches the street and riding slowly away, keeping his careful balance like a stately jungle king on his baby elephant.

Ellen shifts her stare to this familiar figure, another example of the square's architectural wonders. She follows the outline of his clothing and lets her eye jump from shoe to shirt. He hides in his clothes, winter and summer, this year or next, the same garments: bib overalls and long sleeved shirts, heavy work shoes of the kind her mother used to call clodhoppers, worn suit coat and a felt hat with no particular shape. In the winter he covers it all with a topcoat that comes to his ankles; he is not a tall man. Even then he wears no socks; there is always the flash of pale skin between the top of his shoes and his pant legs, tied up with pieces of old twine to keep them out of the gears of his bicycle.

He was conceived fat, not roly-poly jolly soft flesh but solid tight fat that filled his clothes to bursting. His overalls have always been outsize, the legs wide to accommodate his huge thighs, their folds bunched together into the tied-down ends. His face has deep lines and the kind of gray look that comes from not using enough soap. Or from illness. His eyes are an indefinite blue and his hair is just hair color; all his features, nose, ears and the rest, are indistinguishable from those of his fellows who surround him. Still he walks alone, separated in some invisible way from those others.

He does not seem to notice he is among people. Yet now as he passes he looks straight at Ellen, not seeing a woman in the phone booth but Ellen herself, looking into her eyes as though he knows her. Worse, as though he knows an Ellen that no one has ever seen. Their eyes lock; she feels the world whirl giddily around her. For one mad moment she believes he can hear the voice whining in her ear. Is aware of secret furies, old anxieties, a sudden yearning she had not known was there. Helpless, she feels him touch her in her mind's most private place.

It is intolerable. Shaken, she drops her own eyes, stammers some final words and phrases in farewell and hangs up, blindly gathering change, purse, packages as she flees. Sister sighs, sniffs, pouts but does not know she has been present at apocalypse.

Days pass and summer comes. The sister recovers and Ellen also survives. She sleeps, wakes, moves about as though the world had not been shaken by thunder and consumed in flame. In a few weeks she almost believes that she has forgotten an April day, a telephone booth, and an old man's eyes. When she does remember---passing along the street by the courthouse or observing a display of bicycles---she assures herself that the foolish old man is just that and nothing more, his strange and piercing glance was merely a vacant stare or some unexplained trick of the morning light, and the panic in which she fled was only a nervous reaction. She is ashamed of having nerves.

Walking through people on her way home from work on a day in June she sees the old man on the corner by the bank, waiting for the light to change. Perhaps he sees her out of the corner of his eye; he does not turn his head. Then the light goes green and he flows across the street with the others. Ellen walks on alone, stumbling slightly at the curb as though she were suddenly unable to see clearly. She continues on home,

slowly, forcing herself at first to look at dogs, children, and other objects of interest. By the time she puts her key in the lock the incident is buried under thoughts of spinach greens and lamb chop; as she falls asleep a face flashes across her mind like a falling star across the summer sky. The next morning she remembers only that she had no dreams.

She knows nothing about the old man, nor does she wish to, but from time to time he continues to look at her. Once she is walking down Main Street on an evening in late July. She sees him sitting on the steps of the abandoned cigar store, observing the world as it drives by his throne. He swivels his head and there she is; he does not try to stare at the usual points of a man's attention, the round firm well covered breasts, the long legs so modestly hidden, but searches for her eyes instead. He almost finds them. She walks faster, dives into the drugstore and buys a lipstick she does not want, goes out the back entrance and so on home.

Why does he disturb her so? She reminds herself that she has nothing to fear from him; she can run faster and scream louder and hit harder. An unnecessary reminder; she is well aware that his assault is not physical. But she is reluctant to admit that a penetrating stare can so shatter her composure, although she acknowledges that she dislikes being touched by even so slight a touch as the weight of an eye's regard. She can only convince herself repeatedly that the old man is not important yet, fascinated as a bird before a serpent, she begins to watch for him and almost to anticipate his coming.

In August he passes her on the sidewalk outside the dime store. The lines in his face have deepened and the gray look is more pronounced. His body seems thinner too, without the smooth plump tightness she remembered. Is he ill? She tries to imagine him going to a doctor like other mortal beings. Warned of the dangers of overweight, restricted to this much food or that much drink. Watched over as he begins to shrink, slowly deflating like a child's balloon...He sees her at the moment of passing, would meet her eye except for her vigilance. She takes two steps and is safely past and melted away into the crowd.

Where does he go when the night comes? She does not know. In a moment of fantasy she speculates that perhaps he was created out of the myths and legends of the town and no one ever troubled to invent a place of habitation for him. She does not attempt to discover where he lives; she is unwilling to share him and the fearful anticipation of his coming with anyone she knows. There is something delicate, tenuous and set apart, a private space contained in their casual passings that would be destroyed were she to speak of them. She is no longer able to pretend that she has forgotten him; sometimes she believes that he waits for her, that there is some message in his eyes she is not yet willing to receive.

Six weeks later he stands watching her as she crosses the street. Half way over she sees him, falters, moves forward. He does not move or speak; his splay feet are firmly planted to support his bulk and his bicycle leans against the barbershop at his back. She mounts the curb, allowing herself to notice him. She forgets to take her eyes from his. They are more blue than she had thought. This time she does not run; she walks calmly away as though he means nothing to her. Does he turn to watch

her go? She restrains herself rigidly, does not turn around, walks on as she had planned.

She does not know what he sees in her eyes or what she might find in his. It is all part of the puzzle of life, of her parents, her sister, the others she sees around her who couple, quarrel, part or cling together in blind obedience to some instinct she will not recognize. She has kept her life tidy, ordered and empty by choice, her self pure and unviolated. It is too late now to throw open the door to any casual passerby.

The days grow colder; October is nearly gone, the leaves have turned red and are falling, the robins have all gone south and the world is waiting to die. As she walks about the town, going and coming on her sensible errands, she watches for a man in a long gray coat, pushing his bicycle by his side. **Some day he will speak and I must answer.** Deeper than thought, the realization comes with the thud of doom. Oh let him keep silent forever, she prays.

She never sees him again. More weeks have passed; it is mid December and very cold. Snow lies piled in heaps of dirty gray along the sidewalks and the wind is sharp as a knife. Sitting solitary over her evening meal, she picks up a neatly folded newspaper and begins to read. The old man's face leaps out of the page at her and she staggers with the blow. He is dead. Numb, she reads what others in the town had known of him. He was a colorful eccentric, a man who kept entirely to himself and saved his money for two sisters who live in shaky old age far away. The word "lonely" is not mentioned in the story. Leaving the dirty dishes on the table she fumbles through her medicine cabinet until she finds a sleeping pill, and goes to bed. Her last conscious thought is a memory of the old man's eyes, their blue gaze fixed on hers, in their depths some message she is unable to comprehend.

The next morning she wakes and rises as usual, annoyed that she had been so untidy with her clean kitchen. She slides into routine as though this were only an ordinary day; she persuades herself that the weakness of the night before was a result of some slight illness, perhaps a touch of virus. The day continues; she smiles, speaks, takes dictation and says yes Mr. Porter in a sorrow-tinted daze that she tells herself is only fever. Yet no one notices she is ill and the hours pass without comment or meaning until the day is over.

Walking home from work she alters her habitual course, on an impulse, so that she walks along the street by the courthouse square. It has begun to snow; at the corner of the square she hesitates and then, not knowing why she must do so, crosses the wet black street through the softly falling flakes. The telephone booth is empty and there is a scattering of stale gray ashes on the shelf; beyond the door as she closes it the snow continues to come down like a thick white curtain. Shivering, she searches out a dime and dials her sister's familiar number.

Waiting through the long rings at the other end of the line she yields at last to the booth's embrace and rests her cheek against its cold glass wall, staring out into the falling snow as she breathes in the lingering traces of tobacco and Old Spice, surprised to find that she is weeping.