

See No Evil

Samantha closed her eyes and willed herself not see anything, not even the back of her eyelids, not the veins in her eyes floating in woozy patterns across her vision, most of all not the imprint of that woman's silhouette branded onto her retina, the woman in her husband's phone. She didn't know who the woman was, nor could she see her face. The pictures did not reveal her naked flesh, but instead they were snapshots of strangely unerotic female body parts— an elbow, an extended wrist revealing a winding snake tattoo and the woman's profile, her face hidden in shadow, the sunlight falling on only her ear, which was punctured with studs and had a strand of shimmering blonde hair tucked behind it.

They were just images, electromagnetic waves of different frequencies reflecting off the surface of the phone and plummeting into her eyes. They didn't have to mean anything. Samantha tried not to think of how by the second her neurons were spinning bits of information together, bundling them and presenting them to her consciousness. Kyle's work meetings that always ran late. His insistence that she never answer his phone because it could be an important international client. His empty gaze when she undressed before him at night.

Samantha felt her throat constricting, and she grabbed for her inhaler. Her husband remained fast asleep in bed next to her.

Just seconds ago, she had been calmly drifting on a raft that was her bed, floating down a river, undisturbed. This was the vision she conjured for herself to help her fall asleep. After hours of staring at screens and charts and other people's bulging eyes, she had to turn to an imaginary refuge for peace. Her husband, who never had trouble sleeping, had conked out on the bed, phone in hand. It had begun to buzz. Samantha had only wanted to silence it. And now this.

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She thought about waking him up, about making him listen while she accused him, about making him look her in the eye as he admitted what he had done. Eyes, she thought. There were no pictures of the woman's eyes.

"Your eyes are so remarkable," he had told her, on their very first date, back at her old apartment in Berkeley where optometry textbooks and notecards were piled high on every flat surface. They were sitting on her polka-dot couch, their knees touching. He had plucked her thick glasses from her face and gingerly placed them on top of one of the books.

"There, now I can see them better."

Samantha could feel the blood burning her plump cheeks red. She had been this close to patients before, but never had she experienced anyone's eyes boring into her face with such intensity. His eyes were pleasant too, chocolate-brown. Warm and steady. They didn't wander.

Now, ten years later, Samantha lay frozen under the icy sheets of their shared bed. It was dark out, but the glow of LEDs radiating from various electronics plugged in around the room illuminated their dresser covered with frames of their photogenic family. To outsiders, how perfect they must look, Samantha thought. How many times had she gazed at her husband and her daughter at dinner and thought of just that, how perfect the three of them were, what a shining example of the American dream: she, with her own optometry practice where her patients walked out able to see the world a little more clearly, her husband, with his important Vice President position at a multinational corporation that handled exports from ports worldwide, her eight-year-old daughter, Lily, who had inherited her mother's golden locks and her father's handsome nose, who was excelling at third-grade math and scoring goals for her soccer team. On some level, she knew she was a living cliché, but she hadn't cared. Because life was going so much better than she have ever dared to hope.

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She stifled a sob, her fingers bunching into fists, she wanted to smash them all, all the photographs, and use the glass to make her husband bleed.

She loved Kyle because he was ordinary. Because he left the toilet seat up sometimes and he played catch with their daughter on their front lawn and complained about his daily commute. She loved him because he liked vegging in front of the TV late at night but also because his trips around the world for business had left no mark on him. No, they had not distinguished him at all from any other man you would meet on the street. He was who he was, and he wasn't going to absorb some other local culture or change his dress or behavior. He never tried to blend in.

But this discovery inverted all of what she had thought about him, flipped like a reflection in a concave mirror, when you step back and suddenly see that your whole vision has turned upside-down. Who was he, really? This quiet man she thought she knew and loved?

And what about this woman without a face? Where had he met her? Why her? Was it because she had everything that Samantha was missing? Her mind drew inferences, connected the dots. Did she have dyed hair? Did she listen to punk rock? Did she flood him with passion in a way Samantha could not, Samantha, the woman whose flaws he must have seen as his eyes had passed over her body so many times. Samantha had seen his, the beer gut that expanded a little more each year, like the slow widening of a tree trunk, the cruel jokes about dumb blondes with sneaked guilty glances at Samantha and his own daughter, how he cheered while watching violent wrestling matches and reveled in the gore of horror flicks, but she had not said a word. Because she had never wanted to risk losing what they had built together.

The face of someone from her past emerged unbidden into her mind's eye. A woman with pouty lips and a snarl. Stay away from my father, she had said. Now she would be cackling, Samantha thought. What goes around comes around.

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Samantha got up and slipped out of the bedroom. Her hands guided her through the hall. She had Lasik eye surgery three years prior, but she still had to squint to see anything but bulbous shapes in the darkness. Her nightgown brushed the hardwood floor, and she felt her toes pressing into it. She wished they would go on pressing until she melted and became a part of the ground.

She stopped in front of her office, flicked on a lamp, and sank down into a stiff desk chair. She pushed up her laptop screen and without knowing exactly what she was planning to do, she types in *his* name.

Not her husband, but the one who came before him. The one the entire world recognizes. News articles pop up with his face, his eyes, hidden beneath sunglasses. Not to prevent the sun's glare from reaching him, but to prevent the world from being blinded by his unseeing gaze.

Bruno Kaczynski. World-renowned composer. Blind since his childhood in an orphanage in Poland. Samantha could scroll through his biography on Wikipedia, but she knew his life story by heart. Discovered drumming on leftover tin cans to create music, he was adopted by a kind benefactor, a trustee of the San Francisco Symphony, who brought him back to the U.S. where he began his musical education.

Samantha met him while she was interning at a hospital in Berkeley during optometry school. She was working as an assistant for one of the resident ophthalmologists. It was mostly filing paperwork, but once in a while Dr. Carter let her sit in on an eye exam or even an eye surgery.

That day, he told her to help the patient into the exam room.

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“Sara,” he said, motioning for her to listen. He often called her by the wrong first name. “I want you to sit in on this one. The patient, he’s a regular of mine. He has a rare case of childhood blindness. The kind we don’t usually see in the U.S., lucky for us.”

“Why is he coming to see you if he’s blind?”

“We still have to check the overall health of his eyes, make sure there’s nothing out of the ordinary. Plus, we’ve been discussing possible surgery options with him that might be able to cure his blindness. He hasn’t come around to them just yet.”

When she turned the corner to go out to the waiting room, Samantha wasn’t sure what she was expecting to see. Perhaps an old man, frail and hunched over a cane. To her surprise, when she called out his name, a sturdy, fit middle-aged man with a full head of sandy blonde hair, a jutting nose, and sharp cheekbones stood to greet her. He held out his walking stick like it was a conductor’s rod, tapping it lightly on the floor in front of him with a distinct grace. His head stayed upright, held high, as if he always kept his gaze on the heavens.

He found his way over to Samantha in slow, steady steps.

“Hello, Mr. Kuh-zin-ski,” she said. “Did I say it right?” She was shorter than him by a whole head. He found her shoulder and then slid his hand down her arm and grasped it firmly.

“Perfectly, my dear,” he said.

“This way, please.”

She sat in the corner of the exam room. Dr. Carter dimmed the lights and the blind man reclined back in the chair as if was second nature.

“I’m just going to take a look at your eye, Mr. Kaczynski, so please open it wide,” Dr. Carter said. He had an apparatus of magnifying lenses between him and Kaczynski. “Sara, come take a look at this please.”

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She had looked at eyes before in this unglamorous setting, and she knew already that this was what she loved to do, reading other people's retinas for the hints of what had passed before their eyes, what had fallen through their gaze. The nerves at the back of the retina trigger the process of perception, perhaps even memory, so perhaps it wasn't so far-fetched to imagine finding a soul there in the depths of the eyes.

This was the first time she had gazed into the eyes of someone who couldn't gaze back.

Dr. Carter put drops of fluid in Kaczynski's eyes to make his pupils dilate. Then he rushed out of the room, late for another appointment.

"I'll be back in five," he said. "Then we'll take the pictures of your retina, and maybe talk about the retinal implants that I mentioned to you last time."

Kaczynski chuckled a deep, throaty laugh.

"You will never convince me, Doctor Carter," he said. "My broken eyes are what make my ears so sharply tuned."

Samantha remained in the room, sure that both the doctor and patient had forgotten her.

"You are still here, Sara, no?"

"Um, yes, I am, Mr. Kaczynski."

"No need to call me sir. Bruno is fine. Come here."

He took one of her hands, and felt it.

"You are young, Sara, are you not?"

"My name is Samantha, actually," she squeaked, taken aback by his nimble fingers, which traveled over the back of her hand and up her arm, sending pinpricks of lightning underneath her skin where they touched.

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“Sa-man-tha” he enunciated, his voice twirling her name into a low melody. “Samantha, tell me, do you sing?”

She shook her head. A second later, she realized her mistake.

“No,” she said. “I don’t.”

“It is a shame, you have a very beautiful voice.”

“I don’t really know anything about music,” she admitted. “I just know about eyes and anatomy and that sort of thing.”

“Well Eye Girl,” he said, “When you look at my eyes, what do you see?”

She stared at his pupils which had expanded into tiny black holes, swallowing her into them.

“An eye that doesn’t work, but is otherwise healthy.”

He squeezed her hand.

“How do you know that they don’t work? Just because they don’t do what other eyes do, does that mean they cannot see?”

“What do you see?” she whispered.

He smiled. She noted the stubble on his sharp chin. Who shaved his face?

“To know that, my dear Samantha, you must come to one of my concerts. Promise me, you will.”

She nodded, and though the words did not slip from her lips, she knew he felt the motion pass through her entire body and release into the arm of his that held her.

Later on, that night, when she was filing paperwork in the office on their shiny, brand new office computer, a Windows 98, that was connected to the World Wide Web, she took the liberty of searching for his name online. She shuffled papers while she waited for a response to

return. The page loaded. There he was, composer and conductor at the San Francisco Symphony. She pulled up a list of his upcoming performances and jotted them down on a sticky note.

Then she snuck a peek at his file, overriding the confidentiality warnings that popped up when she tried to open it.

Fifty-five years old, older than she expected for his physical state. She was twenty-two. Her eyes glanced down the rest of his file. Next to marital status, was the letter M.

She closed the window, shame creeping up her thighs like a slimy, wet snake. She threw away the post-it-note, and feeling dirty, washed her hands.

The next few days she avoided the temptation of the computer, stationing herself at the desk to help patients as they checked in.

Dr. Carter motioned for her to stop what she was doing one morning.

“Can you call Mr. Kaczynski?” he asked. “His retinal scans are in. Everything looks as well as can be expected. Tell him he doesn’t have to come in again until his next check-up in a year from now— that is, unless he changes his mind about the surgery.”

He handed her a folder with the scans. She shoved them in their file in a drawer without peeking at them and tapped her colleague, the part-time secretary soccer-mom, Anita, on the shoulder.

“Can you make a quick phone call for me? I’m really behind on all this other work I have to do.”

She wrote down Bruno’s phone number on a sticky note and handed it to Anita.

“No problem, Sam,” Anita answered, taking the note.

And that was that, or so she thought.

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Later, that afternoon she was studying an optometry textbook in the office. It was a slow day. There were no patients in the waiting room. Anita had left to go pick up her kids.

She felt her fingers roaming towards the desk drawer, and flipping through the folders. She pulled out the scans and spread them before her. If anyone asked, she was using them as a visual aid to help her study.

There was his retina, red like the nucleus of a sunset bursting outwards. And the veins. She could find whole constellations in these veins, secret messages carved into his eye, of lovers lost and longing.

She noticed Anita had left the post-it note with Kaczynski's number on the top of the scheduling book. Underneath his name and number was written "Still To Do."

Samantha picked up the phone and dialed.

She never thought she would be on the other side of the mirror, sneaking glimpses of her husband's hidden trysts like Bruno's wife must have done with her. Now she understood the dull ache of betrayal, the sensation of something rotting in your own bed. Samantha knew she had not been Bruno's first mistress, although she liked to hope she had been his last. Even if Bruno had been able to see, he wouldn't have left any pictures lying around for his wife to discover, Samantha was sure of that. But now Samantha wondered how Mrs. Kaczynski had felt, lying awake while her husband was out with younger women. She didn't know much about the woman, just that she was a singer Bruno had met in his youth, one that had adored him, followed him around until he had finally agreed to marry her. Or at least that's how he had told it. What a fool she had been for believing such a story! A story told to shrink Mrs. Kaczynski down to a

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speck of dust like one that clings to the lens of your glasses, a smudge that you can wipe away. What tale did Kyle tell to his mistress about Samantha? How she was a passionless robot, too focused on her work to attend to the needs of her husband? How she wouldn't settle for less than perfection and nagged at him constantly? How she cared more about eyes than about people?

He kept an apartment in Marin just for himself and had his own driver, which he sent to pick up Samantha every weekend. After they made love, he would take her onto their balcony overlooking the bay. He never asked her what she saw. Perhaps an earlier lover had already described the view to him. Instead, he would teach her how to listen. For the seagulls, the fog horn, the lapping waves. He told her there was a symphony playing right before their eyes. But she could not hear it, not matter how hard she tried. Even if she closed her eyes she could not prevent the bursts of color on her eyelids from overtaking her other senses.

Bruno didn't seem to mind that his lover never was able to learn his lesson. He needed to keep on teaching her, training her to sharpen her ears. She knew that if she had understood him perfectly and his music then he would have no interest in her. That was just the way he was.

She didn't like his music. She had sat through his first concert, her mind dizzy from the sounds which refused to soothe her or harmonize into a triumphant melody that she could follow. But it wasn't bad. It was beautiful in an eerie, startling way. That was the only time she attended one of his performances, however. From then on, the only melodies he shared with her were Italian serenades that he had learned in his youth from his singing master. He chanted them on his knees, while she watched on his bed, her lips curled into a half-smile.

He liked to listen to her undress and then seize her all at once.

She felt a thrill when she looked into his eyes and knew he couldn't stare back.

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When she was at school, sometimes her life felt like it wasn't real. She pored over optometry textbooks, watched bad animations of nerve cells wriggling, squinted into microscopes until her eyes felt like they had withered up into raisins. It was only when she was on her way to see him that she felt drops well up into her tear ducts, only then did she look beyond what was more than ten feet in front of her face and not find it blurry and out of focus.

She remembered how one day she had been complaining to him about her aching eyes. They were sitting on his balcony, and a salty wind was blowing in across the bay, making her eyes well up with tears.

"I don't know how long I can keep this up," she admitted to him. "The long hours, the studying. I feel like my eyes are going to fall out."

He turned towards her and grasped her face in his fingers. Then she saw his unseeing eyes, and she remembered.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I shouldn't be complaining."

"Don't apologize, my love," he said to her. His voice was a near-whisper, but it carried like a song across a concert hall. "You must not abuse your poor eyes any longer."

His fingers brushed against her eyelids and softly they shut.

"Listen, my dear, smell, touch." He kissed her on the lips. "Taste."

I hear a plane passing by, she thought, trying to play along. And some birds I don't recognize. I smell his cologne and the sea air. I feel the roughness of his hands... It was no use, her eyes still throbbed.

"What do you see, truly, Bruno?" she asked. "Is it just black? Or is it something more?"

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He did not answer. Then sighing he dropped his palms from her cheeks.

“It always comes back to my eyes with you, doesn’t it?” he said and turned away from her, folding his arms. He couldn’t close his ears, but she knew he was tuning her out, going somewhere deeper where only music existed.

It was on one of her school days that his daughter found her. She was at her research lab, checking test tubes and marking off measurements on a clipboard when her P.I. called her over.

“Samantha, there is someone to see you.”

She knew it was Bruno’s daughter as soon as she saw the woman’s frown, which resembled Bruno’s own frown when he was frustrated with his work. On those days, Samantha would pull out the flashcards she had brought with her and study as he boxed an invisible enemy in his garage, sending a cascade of sounds from the crashing instruments that he threw around like props.

The woman was a few years older than Samantha. She glared at her father’s lover through her round glasses while she clutched her purse to her bosom. She wore a drab, faded dress and pumps.

Samantha shed her lab coat and walked with the woman outside.

“Stay away from my father,” the woman barked at her. “I know what kind of woman you are.”

Samantha didn’t say a word.

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“My mother won’t speak up for herself, so I must speak for her. I don’t know what you want— money, fame, whatever it is, I don’t care. You are never to see my father again. If you do, we can make life very difficult for you.

“You want to be an optometrist? Cure blindness? Well my mother and I are very well-connected. We’re part of more organizations for the blind and visual-impaired than you will ever encounter in your measly career. So if you want to have a future...”

Samantha thought of Bruno’s eyes and of the prints of his retina, which she had secretly made copies of and brought home. She thought of never being able to touch him or listen to his accented words. In that moment, she let her brain weigh the two and let the heavier one fall out of her mouth.

“Say goodbye to him for me,” she said. Then she walked back inside and donned her lab coat.

She had never told her husband about Bruno, lest he become too jealous. Even when she and Kyle were first dating, she had sensed that the affair was something in her life that no one else could touch, that must be kept pristine and fresh in the memory of her eyes, her ears, her lips.

“Mommy, why are you up?” Lily said. She peered into Samantha’s office. She was holding a stuffed dog in her hand, the one that she and Kyle had bought her when she was just an infant. Its floppy ears were almost falling off and its fur was dirty, but Lily clutched it tight under her arm all the same.

“I was— I was,” she stuttered, momentarily caught off guard.

“The better question is what are you doing up, Lily? Go back to sleep,” Samantha told her and she quickly closed her search window. She scooped up her daughter, a feat which was

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becoming harder each year as her little girl grew strong and tall. Lily giggled. Samantha took her back into her room, and placed her back in bed, tucking her in and placing her menagerie of stuffed animals around her.

“Now sleep, Lily,” she ordered. “You’re in your cocoon and you can’t come out until the sun comes up. Or else you’ll never grow into a butterfly.”

“Okaaaaaaaaay,” Lily said, trying to pout but failing. “Goodnight Mommy.”

Samantha watched as her daughter snuggled against her dog and her bears, her cats, and her rabbits. She waited until her daughter had closed her eyes to softly shut the door.

She paced for a moment in front of her daughter’s bedroom door, running through the past again, and the present, trying to discern a pattern in the tangle of memories that her neurons had woven together. How long could she act like she had seen nothing? How long would it take for him to realize that she could no longer look him in the eye?

She didn’t want to divorce Kyle. She couldn’t do that to Lily, who loved her Mommy and Daddy together. But she wouldn’t live a lie either, keeping up appearances. Maybe if they could talk about it together, with a therapist to referee, they could work something out. He didn’t even have to love her anymore, she decided. She had eyes to see at her work, and a daughter to watch over. She didn’t need his warmth, his laughter, not if he was sharing it with another woman, she thought defiantly, balling up her hands into fists.

“You cannot look at the sun without blinding yourself,” Bruno’s voice floated into her ear, a memory of another day long past. “You can only close your eyes and let it redden your vision, and let its warmth embrace you like a lover. You cannot look at the sun, but it can touch you, Samantha. Isn’t that strange?”

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She took a deep breath. She knew what she needed to do. She would not yell and scream at Kyle and tear their already fragile marriage to pieces. Instead she would crawl into bed next to him, and wrap her arms around him, close her eyes and whisper to him.

“I love you,” she would say. She hoped it would be enough.

And in the dark she would feel his arms slip around her back and she would imagine they were Bruno’s. Constellations would burst under her eyelids and she would finally know what Bruno had seen all along.