Isaac Escovedo

Orange Grass and the Six-Eyed Owl

If you, like me, were part of the 14% of four-to-eleven year olds who needed glasses, I think you were very lucky. You were lucky because you had the privilege of looking out at the world one day and realizing that it was so much more full of life than you ever imagined. I will never forget my day. I remember driving home from the eye doctor and realizing that trees weren't just big blobs of green; they had *leaves* on them. My vision rests somewhere around 120 over 20, which means that without glasses I can see at 20 feet what the average human can see at 120 feet. My mum says she took me to the zoo once when I was little and felt frustrated that I kept looking at the leaves on the bushes instead of the elephant standing 20 feet away. In my defense, an elephant doesn't look much different from a minivan when you're four years old and blind as a bat.

I've always liked going to the eye doctor. When I go to the dentist or the body doctor I'm worried that they'll discover something horribly wrong with me, but with the eye doctor there's no suspense. I know exactly what's wrong, and there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to tell you whether that's an O or a Q on the fourth line down from the top of the vision chart. My eye doctor is named Dr. Matsunami, and he's the only eye doctor I've ever had. My mum started going to him when she was young and he was young and just starting his practice. Now she's getting old and he's getting old and it's becoming more difficult to schedule an appointment because he only works Tuesdays and Wednesdays. But I'd still rather make the hike from Bellingham down to Capitol Hill than go to an optometrist who doesn't remember what I was like when I couldn't spell my own name.

Dr. Matsunami wears socks with glasses on them and I call him “doc”, which I think bugs him a little. In return he makes me look at a picture of a hot air balloon with a red dot in the middle of it and puts a great big mechanical device that looks like an owl up to my face and asks me “which is sharper? One, or two? One… or two?” I’m pretty good at the owl by now. I could go pro.

When I was in fifth grade I asked Dr. Matsunami about contact lenses. Glasses hurt after a while, and they get scratched and bent and dirty. Contacts also make it look like you’re not wearing glasses, and scientific studies say that while wearing glasses does make others perceive you as smarter, they also make others perceive you as slightly less attractive. That must not have been a very big factor in fifth grade, because when Dr. Matsunami put the contact lens in my eye I yowled like two cats in a fight and decided that they weren’t worth it at all.

I wore glasses until my sophomore year of high school, when we tried the contact lens thing again. This time Dr. Matsunami brought out a pair of see-through dinner plates made of hard plastic. I need a plunger to put them in my eyes and a suction cup to pull them out, and I’m 99% sure they’re bullet proof. It took me more than two weeks to learn to install them, but now I can rub my finger all over my eyeball without even flinching, so it was all worth it if you ask me.

My contacts, which are called *gas impermeable scleral lenses*, sometimes make my eyes look red and bloodshot. This was not ideal in highschool, where my teachers probably suspected I was constantly stoned. Nowadays my red eyes are less of an issue. In academia, looking constantly stoned is a standard prerequisite for teaching a 400-level seminar.

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There are plenty of benefits to my contact lenses: I don't cry when I cut onions. I never lose staring contests. I can see without wearing glasses. But for every benefit there's a drawback: when I'm really focused I have to blink manually or else my eyelids scrape across my dried out eyeballs, which hurts. If I put them in wrong, an air bubble creates a vacuum against my pupil, which hurts a lot. I have to be extra careful about cleaning the things because if any bacteria worm their way under my contacts they'll be trapped there, happily chewing through my iris until I go blind. If you're curious, look up eye-eating amoebas. Or don't. In spring, pollen slips beneath my contacts and makes my eyeballs itch like they have athlete's foot. When I wear them for too long my eyes feel like potato chips. My contacts are a big meaty pair of work boots, and I grew up in a shoes-off household.

The issue isn't even just with my eyes. I have amblyopia, also called lazy eye in both eyes. Amblyopia isn't an ocular defect, it's a cranial one. My brain just doesn't register detail very well. It's frustrating because there's no lasik for my occipital lobe. I've just got the wrong mindset. As a little kid I felt like maybe it would get better. Maybe my brain would keep developing and I would grow out of my bad vision like I did diapers and skinny jeans. Sometimes when I was just waking up I would look at the edge of the bed and tell myself it looked sharper than usual. I would put my glasses on slowly, imagining that they would just make my vision blurrier the way they did for my friends. Then they'd slide into place and the edge of the bed would suddenly possess wood grain and a big scratch from a screwdriver and my heart would sink because my vision hadn't gotten better after all.

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One of the biggest day-to-day issues with my eyes has to do with their cones. All of our eyes are full of little rod cells and cone cells, which detect low levels of light and varying frequencies of light respectively. My eyes are missing their green cones, so I have trouble distinguishing middling shades of green and red. Lots of people, including me, wonder what red-green colorblind people *see*, so I showed some graphic designers a comparison picture and they said that my vision is sepia tinted. Some of us can't help but look at the world through piss-colored glasses.

This is an issue because I'm a filmmaker, and color is a huge element in filmmaking. When you record video on a fancy cinema camera it comes out the other side looking drab and gray. This grayness is a lie, though. In fact, cinema cameras go to great lengths to record as much information about the color of each pixel as possible, and with fancy video editing software you can control those colors in fantastical ways. You can make a whole scene look yellow and your audience will know it takes place in Mexico. You can make all your shadows blue and they'll know it's about sparkly vampires. The problem for me is that deuteranomaly makes for some really interesting coloring. Sometimes I make grass orange, or make people's faces sickly green. The best workaround I've found is to behave like a robot, following the *rules* of coloring without paying much attention to the image in front of me. Then I have someone who isn't colorblind stand over my shoulder and tell me when something looks weird. It's frustrating, and I'll never be good at it no matter how hard I try. But hey, red-green colorblind people can see more shades of khaki, so I'm a great person to bring along if you're ever shopping at The Gap.

None of these are big problems. I can still drive. I can still see the sunrise and the birds hopping around in the trees and the words on the page of the book I'm reading. And yet, if I had one wish, I would wish for perfect vision in a heartbeat. Every time I have a check-up I ask Dr. Matsunami about the possibility of surgery even though I already know the answer. If you get eye surgery you aren't allowed to be a Gurkha because it increases the risk that your eyeball will fracture if a grenade goes off nearby. That's a risk I'd be willing to take. The little things add up, and I spend a lot of time thinking about how in the event of a zombie apocalypse I would run out of my specialty contact lens solution and have to go back to wearing glasses. And the guy wearing glasses always dies in horror movies.

I have trouble with shades of gray. That's not a colorblindness thing, it's just tough to make sense of the fact that my eyes can be a source of constant minor irritation without ever being anything more or less. None of these issues are life-ruining. I don't have cancer. I don't live in an iron lung. In fact, I've had worse problems myself. I physically couldn't run in high school due to chronic injuries. The doctors were worried I had muscular dystrophy. I quit sports I had competed in for nearly a decade, and my wrestling coaches will never forgive me. These things had a far greater impact on my well being than my milquetoast eyeballs ever will.

That's why I think about them so much. Like the chocolate chips my mum keeps in the freezer, my eyes are bittersweet. Bitter when I'm hiking and I have to choose between glasses that dig into my head and a potential eye infection from putting in dirty contacts, but oh so sweet when I sit and see the mountains in all their craggy glory. In this compromise lies life's beauty. The fact that my eyes are bad, and the endless tiny

frustrations they engender, are what encourage me to see the sublimity. To stop and stare at the sunset, to admire the scratches new and old in my coffee table, and to observe the bravado writ large in the faces of my fellow college students as we all try to convince each other that we are fully formed adults brimming with confidence and complexity. The weakness of my eyes is the reason I love the things we cannot hear or touch or smell or taste. The words on the page, the bodies on the screen, the hills on the horizon. And the letters in the mirror, *A F Z Q D* as Dr. Matsunami clicks the eyes of the owl and asks me “1… or 2? 3? Orrrrr 4?”

I’m glad that I was born in a time period where a factory in the UK can manufacture small plastic frisbees custom-designed to the shape of my cornea. I like that I can look at other people’s eyes and get that jolt of recognition that comes with remembering that another human being is looking at the world from their own perspective. There is wonder in the fact that we all see the world just a little differently. In 30 years my friends with perfect vision will start to notice that things aren’t as clear as they once seemed. They will look at the pyramid of letters on the wall, and practice the owl, and the next time I see them I will notice they are sheepishly wearing a brand new pair of spectacles. And I will smile at them, and ask, “does the grass in this shot look a little orange?”