



Lenses by Leah Silverman

Tomorrow, I must take Grusha's eyes out. She specifically requested that I be the one to do it.

I am sitting in my room, watching the great arch of the black sky revolve around me through the clear window-wall. The stars are very large tonight, brighter than usual – perhaps we have moved closer to them. I put my hand to the wall, but I can never feel any heat through it.

I should be sleeping. It is important not to be tired when one must perform surgery.

I would not have performed this operation, except that Grusha asked me to. There are ways of getting out of doing the surgery, if you know of them. I could have said I was sick, perhaps. They know how crucial it is not to overwork their surgeons. But Grusha asked me, so I must do it.

I am twenty-eight and was born on Earth. This is unusual nowadays, I know, but my mother loved the green things of our planet and would never have survived in this world of metal and glass. I have been here for seven years. I started active duty late, compared to those born here, but I am skilled, and good surgeons are so necessary these days that there is no room to complain.

If I were to look down and to my left I would see the planet – though the soldiers on the surface are invisible from this height except to this base's sensors. We are above the planet's day-side, though it is night

up here, and in a few hours the first of the day's wounded will arrive. It is hard to imagine men and women fighting and dying there. I think it's because it is such a bright yellow colour, reflecting the light of the stars. In the morning, however, the alarm bells will ring and I will rush to Level Two, as I have done every morning since I first arrived.

Level Two is where they send the patients who are the least wounded. Those who only need prosthetic limbs implanted in their already cauterized stumps, for example, or computer chips in their heads to replace destroyed parts of their brains. Recently, it has also become standard practice to replace their eyes.

Grusha is a pilot, and if I were to go to the hangar now I would find her ambulance, waiting in cold machine silence for her to return. She calls it the Kracevoi, though she has never told me what it means. She is a good pilot, and very brave. I met her when I was also flying the ambulances, before it was decided that I would be more useful on Level Two.

Grusha has brown eyes, very deep, that dance with life when she laughs and flash when she is serious to echo the importance of her words. It is essential that they be replaced because of the harshness of the planet's sun. The soldiers who come back after a year there all have skins tanned a deep black, and hair bleached of almost all colour. The sun-goggles they are issued are unbearable in the heat, and in the light their eyes become useless very quickly. Without the new eyes they would all go blind. Grusha doesn't spend as much time on the planet's surface as the soldiers, but her exposed skin is a deep brown now all the same, and her score on the last eye exam was lower than her previous ones. Her new eyes will never go blind, and if a bomb or laser destroys them we can give her others.

But her new eyes will not be brown, and they will not shine with her laughter.

It is too late now to try sleeping, and I have in my hand an old photograph, one I took the last time we visited home. The photo is in



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black and white so that it seems old though it was only taken five years ago. If I wanted to, I could pick up the gallery box beside the other photo albums in the drawer and see all the pictures I wanted – thousands of them – flash on the screen. All in colour. Some even move.

But I like the black and white photographs. The pictures seem less real, somehow, without colour. More like an idea of what was seen, rather than the reality of it. Grusha looks back at me from the grey world of the photo I'm holding. She looks unearthly – very white against the white clouds behind her. Her hair is grey here, perhaps already starting to pale. Her eyes are darker. She is not really smiling, though her mouth curves up. Her jacket is open, and the loose sweater beneath it is a washed black. In coloured life it is red; she still has it. Her hands lightly grasp the bottom of the jacket. The fingers look lost there, somehow, where they cannot be useful.

I can imagine in my memory that moment, a second of time frozen for as long as forever is, unique from what went before or after. Did I take an instant out her thoughts when I took that picture, just as I took the moment in time? What was she thinking at that precise moment? I never thought to ask her.

The wind in the picture is strong, and all her hair is pulled back from her forehead and to the side. Her hair was once a deeper brown than her eyes, and was always long, even after they complained to her about it.

Her eyes look like black liquid in the photo, like wells. The thoughts behind them must be serious. You can tell by the quality of her eyes, the way they glisten beneath the light. Grusha has eyes that hold you when you look into them.

If I take a picture of her again, after the operation, there will be nothing there to focus on. No more thoughts to see, no more liquid darkness. Only the eye of the camera lens will grin back at me, empty and perfectly reflected.

In ten minutes the first bell will ring, and I will have to go and help the other surgeons. Grusha will be waiting, sedated to make her calm. I do not want to see her before I do the operation. Words have always been a burden to me and I can't think of anything to say. I wonder if she

is afraid. Most likely not. Grusha is far more practical than I am, and would fully understand the necessity of infallible eyes. Perhaps afterwards, when she looks into a mirror again, it will make no difference. I could never imagine her crying. I cry a lot. It is far too easy for me, even after all this time. It is not good to think of Grusha right now. It would be awful to cry so close to my duty-time.

The Pre-Op room is large and white, and smells sweet with some sort of antiseptic. The nurse hands me Grusha's final medical exam as I walk in. I have been Grusha's only doctor since I first changed from the ambulances, and I know what the small screen will list before I look at it. Grusha is in excellent health – she could not have been a pilot otherwise. Her vital signs are fine, and I force myself to stop looking for a reason not to do the operation. The nurse would have told me if there had been anything. Grusha calls out a lazy greeting, and her voice sounds loose and relaxed, her dark accent slightly more pronounced. I listen for a hint of nervousness, an edge of fear that might have slipped past the gentle mask of the sedative, but there is nothing. As I have said, Grusha is practical. And brave. And she is radiant, even in the ridiculous hospital gown. Even with far too dark hands and face and hair the colour of a winter sun. She was always very beautiful. I am glad that has not been taken from her. I am glad that she is still whole. For the moment. Thinking of that makes me want to weep. Her eyes sparkle like black water.

"Come here!" she says, she raises a deep brown hand to beckon. "Let's make this quick, *da?* I don't like this place – there are stars all around and I can't be near them. Come," she says again. She smiles, like she is the doctor and I the frightened patient who needs to be reassured. I still haven't spoken, but I smile to please her. I want to say something good, befitting of my role here, but instead I only manage:

"I'm sorry, Grusha. I have to do this. It must be done." She blinks, the drugs and my words leaving her a little off-balance. Then her face become serious, and she nods.

It's all right, Corinne," she says quietly. "I've accepted it. Please, don't be upset. I will be fine. Truly, I'll be fine." And then she pulls

herself slowly into more of a sitting position, and embraces me, to let me share her strength.

It is two days since the operation, and though she is still sore the patches will come off and I must be there to supervise it. The few metres to her room seem like the longest distance I have ever walked. Though I was the one who put her new eyes in, I the one who sewed the muscle to the holes in the metal shell, I can' barely find the courage to face what I have done. I have no words for how I felt to finally sever the optic nerve and take the globe out, though it would have been easier to carve my own heart out of my chest. I took exquisite care with the operation, to ensure that her new eyes will move as readily as the old, and will transmit perfect images to her brain. It doesn't matter. Her eyes are gone now, with two metal spheres in their place. Because of me. I think of how they looked free of their sockets – strange, lost alien things, ripped from their life and purpose. I think of the blank camera lens. My own eyes feel heavy; I am acutely aware of them. It occurs to me how easy it would be to gouge them, to take my trembling fingers and tear them out.

And now I am at her room. I announce that I am here, and the door slides open.

Grusha is sitting on the edge of the bed, impatient as the nurse checks her blood pressure. She looks no different, except for the glaring white patches on her eyes. She is nervous without her sight, and looks up quickly when she hears the door open.

"Corinne?" she asks. She is looking in my direction but not at me. I answer and she smiles. The nurse nods to me and says her blood pressure is fine. I thank him and he leaves.

"Well?" she prompts. "I'm sick of being blind and these things on my eyes are itching me!" She laughs, but it sounds tight. I should say something to her but cannot bring the sound out of my mouth. Instead I touch her gently to make her look towards me.

"Sit still," I say finally. "This will only take a minute." She complies, her hands steady but tense on her lap, her ankles locked together. She

looks suddenly like a young girl, and the image bothers me. I take the tape from the edges of the patches as quickly as possible without bothering the still-sensitive skin. They come away easily, and I have to hold her hands down to keep her from touching her slightly swollen lids. They were damaged by the operation, of course, but are not bruised because the laser cauterized the cuts. She opens her new eyes slowly, blinking a few times as if to get the feel of them.

“It’s strange...” she says slowly, shifting her gaze around the room, “I was expecting the light to hurt, but it doesn’t. And everything is so clear...” She laughs again. “My old eyes were nothing compared to these ones!” She reaches to touch them and stops. She looks at me, then and, in that instant, though I am smiling for her, I think my heart breaks.

“So,” she says, her voice suddenly intent, “how do I look?” The words are flippant, but I know her, and I can see the look on her face. The idea of new eyes was easy for her, but the reality has left her shaken. Now it is I who must be the comfort.

But they are solid grey, like the pupilless eyes of a rat. The colour of the walls around us. There is no depth in them. The light reflects from them as off a mirror, jarring bright. Like she has no eyes at all.

Like my eyes. My two steel-blue eyes that were put in as soon as I left the ambulances, that magnify better than any microscope. I have long since stopped trying to tell myself that it doesn’t matter that they are cold and shiny and lifeless. That these eyes have made me a better surgeon, that they have helped me save countless lives. I have seen myself too many times to still believe it.

It was with these eyes that I took the picture of her. With these eyes that I took her own out.

She looks at them now with a kind of wonder that is almost terror. Her face, her own eyes are reflected in them, and she is beginning to realize just how it will be, now, living like this for the rest of her life.

But not yet. I can still spare her that.

“You look good,” I say. And I pull her close, as if I could protect her. And I try to see.