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The Eyeballs of Cecile

THE DOCTOR GAVE THE PARENTS DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS for how to tend their daughter's eyeballs. Due to the fact that these notes were handwritten, coupled with the strange, gleaming quality of the doctor's eyes, the parents had their doubts; however, lacking any other recourse, they followed his orders to the letter, and everything worked out fine, minus a number of painful yet brief crises that were only to be expected in a household containing three children, two of them boys. Once, for instance, an eyeball was accidentally dropped into a glass of lemonade rather than into the mild saline solution, and, burning from the residual acid, Cecile refused to open her eyes for the next twelve hours, at which point they were forced to take her to the emergency room, where she was sedated so her eyelids could be pried open and her eyeballs popped out to be tended. Then there was the time the five-year-old Cecile insisted on doing it all herself, which culminated in both eyes rolling around in the sink on the brink of the garbage disposal. There were other incidents too. An eyeball rolling under the couch like a marble and reemerging covered in dust and cat hair. Eyeballs hidden by mischievous brothers and discovered by an infuriated mother at the bottom of the toy chest, balanced in the plaster hands of the garden gnome, resting among the cotton-balls in the bathroom. Cecile laughed as hard as her brothers at these times, titillated by her parents' fury. But always both eyeballs were eventually returned to her, and again she could see, and be a normal child again—albeit with precociously bloodshot eyes—for the next twelve hours, until the eyeballs had to be popped out and tended once more.

The mother became accustomed to what had begun as a horrifying task (those first few months she'd rush to the bathroom, hiding her gags, as soon as the eyeballs were back in the infant Cecile's eye sockets, and would stay there for a long time, clinging to the toilet). She taught herself how to gouge the eyeballs out as swiftly as possible with a set of chopsticks, kept a pair of slotted spoons and a series of four bowls beside the sink for the procedure, and every twelve hours carefully dipped each eyeball in the four soothing solutions while Cecile sat, fidgety and blind and gaping-holed, in her little chair.

Cecile's eyes were large, her pupils green flecked with copper. They were enchanting, ethereal almost, and frequently strangers were unable to resist the urge to approach Cecile, gaze into and gush over her eyes. Mid-gush, though, they'd notice something. . . odd about those eyes, and would suddenly lose their train of thought, would become perhaps frightened, perhaps shy, would peter off, smile, apologize, drift away. Cecile and her family grew accustomed to this, and at night her parents would lament the fact that her eyes were so eye-catching. The terrible irony of it. It would be so much easier, they'd murmur to each other, if they weren't almost beautiful.

Cecile, recognizing that she was a sort of freak, talked about working as a projectionist in a movie theater—that or any other solitary profession. At a very early age, she resigned herself to spinsterhood, monsterhood. Her friendships were limited and tense—yes, a crowd of girls might show up for her elaborate annual birthday parties, into which her parents poured a good deal of their limited resources, but because she insisted on keeping her condition a secret (though of course they sensed it, they knew, kids always do, they could tell something was off, they noticed the thin red capillaries webbing the whites of her eyes, the slightly bulbous quality of her eyeballs) she was always stiff and unhappy around other children. She longed for good eyes.

We should think of your eyes, her mother murmured while dipping the left eyeball into warm mint-infused water, as two itsy-bitsy mammals that we must care for.

TOM, HOWEVER, THOUGHT OF THEM AS SEA CREATURES that had been given to him for safekeeping. Wonderful, shimmering animals from the deep dark depths of the oceans. Living things that had evolved before anything else on earth. Two precious, damp, vulnerable creations.

Cecile had been as secretive with Tom as with anyone, hiding her deformity, every night and every morning pulling the kitchen shades before her mother began the ritual. But he'd persisted, more fascinated by the weird, terrifying quality of her eyes than by the initial radiance of them that had drawn him in. He followed her down the street on his bicycle, gently questioning her. He left small gifts for her that a blind person could enjoy more than a sighted person—a carved wooden animal, for instance, or a bit of fur, or a piece of embossed stationery. She fingered these things in her lap while her mother dipped each of the eyeballs. After the eyeballs were returned to her, she was disappointed by the appearance of the objects.

When the time came, Cecile's mother trained Tom. She bestowed upon him the yellowed piece of notebook paper containing the doctor's precise instructions. He watched her perform the procedure in her practiced way: one pop, two pop, slotted spoon, drop one, drop two, fish out one, fish out two, next bowl, drop one, drop two, etc., etc., until the eyeballs were returned, moist and refreshed, into the skull of his fiancée. The night before the wedding, he himself did it. Cecile was crying before her eyes were back in, smooth tears emerging from her gaping sockets.

They feel so good, she wept when Tom popped her eyes in. Better than ever, she said. Better than ever.

SOMETIMES WHEN THEY FOUGHT HER EYES WOULD POP OUT of their sockets and roll around on the floor. Tom would pick them up, rinse them off, and return them to her. By that time they would have forgotten where they were in the fight.

Sometimes when she got excited or hysterical with laughter around Tom, her eyeballs would fall out of their sockets and land in her lap. This happened one time at a diner, except they fell into the strawberries on her Belgian waffle. While such an event once would have been enough to send her rushing shamefully out of the restaurant and keep her ensconced in the house for a week, now it was only cause for greater hilarity.

They frequently popped out during orgasm, shooting across the room and hitting the wall with a soft, punctuating thud, or ending up snarled in the sheets. Tom had never received such high compliment for his skills, and the explosion of her eyeballs out of her skull would always bring him swiftly to climax. Eye-poppingly good, they'd murmur smugly to each other afterward, and he'd wait a long while before getting up to locate the ecstatic eyeballs.

This had never happened in the past, that fury or glee would make her eyeballs pop out.

Tom, a carpenter, developed innovative techniques for tending her eyes. One of the best ways to soothe them, he found, was to place each in his mouth for one minute after dipping it in the four bowls. He'd swirl it around on his tongue until it felt very smooth and very warm. It had a slight salty taste and the taut, elongated quality of a green grape. Early on he had to overcome a mild sensation of disgust as he spooned the eyeball between his lips, but soon he came to cherish this finishing touch on the ritual. Cecile would moan happily as he returned each

End of excerpt. For the full text, please see our print issue.