



See Only the Sunset, Love Only the Sea

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THE GREEN room spun and finally settled to a slow swim as the bandages were removed from Keith's eyes. At the end of the bed was his mother, a lovely blur of piled hair and bright red mouth in a silly false attempt at a smile. There was no feeling now, he noticed, no pain, no movement in the eye socket. The glass eye, he had heard them say, fit the child well.

"Darling," his mother squealed, "it's hardly noticeable. Exactly the right color and everything."

Keith stared at the ceiling, trying not to listen to the doctor conferring with his mother. They spoke in a distant corner about the strange new eye. Directions were spit from the doctor's mouth. Don't take it out. Don't let him handle it. Be careful of infection, especially now. And Keith watched the white ceiling and remembered the pain and his mother's hysteria. Her screaming had terrified him even more than the pain and he had fled from the house, the blood pouring down his face. A neighbor had called an ambulance and then there was the shot, the end of pain, the operation, the dizzying smell of the hospital, two weeks of nausea and

sleep and now. Now it was Saturday, someone had told him, and Saturday was his special day, a day he loved because he was free from school and home and could go down to the old river dock where he sat all day and talked to the old man who lived there, or watched the minnows, or swam.

He thought of returning to school on Monday. His stomach jumped at the idea. He anticipated the questions and mocking jokes about his eye. Maybe they would laugh at it right to his face. He thought about their laughter and wondered if he could stand it and then he thought of the false, horrible, immovable eye. But he did not cry.

Finally, after his mother had again assured him of the success of the new eye, everyone left for awhile. Keith reached onto the small dresser at his bedside and took out a mirror. Slowly, his eyes shut, he brought the mirror to his face, counted to ten, and opened his eyes. There it was, huge and ugly, to him, and too bright a blue. He moved his own eye but the monster would not move with it. He knew he hated it more than anything, and he threw the mirror to the end of the bed, hoping it would crash to the floor, but it didn't.

Outside, he remembered as he looked out his window, it was autumn, golden autumn and the boy longed for the smell of burning leaves and the chill of night. It had been hot the day of his accident and now he wanted cool air and freedom and a walk on crackling leaves.

Later that Saturday Keith's mother came to get him. She led him like a queen, proud, tall and beautiful through the sterile corridors but the hand Keith held was cold, always cold, he noticed, no matter how long or how tightly he held it.

At home she spoke in that deep too-pleasant voice of his first day back at school and how jealous everyone would be. As she spoke Keith looked at his mother's high forehead and the dark bouffant hair that made her so tall and lovely. Finally she spoke a little angrily, "Darling, are you listening to me? Are you even looking at me? What are you staring at?"

"Your forehead," Keith answered, not aware that he had been staring.

"That is not polite, Darling. To stare. Don't do it!" She

pulled at the hem of her dress, a nervous gesture Keith recognized. He wondered if the eye made her nervous.

As she rose from the davenport he could tell by her quick movements she was angry. "Honestly, Keith, if you'd rather not talk about it, all right. We'll forget it."

He followed her to her bedroom, a place where he was never comfortable. As he looked around he wondered why his mother wanted a little girl's room. It reminded him of his cousin Kathy's silly bedroom. Ruffles and frills were everywhere, on the curtains, covering the bed and on the little dressing table where she spent so much time sitting.

She sat there again, opening little bottles from which sweet heavy smells came. Quickly she powdered her perfect face and then stared at the mirror, fingering her nose or an eyebrow. Keith stood beside her and watched both of them in the mirror, comparing. Her face was long and wide across the smooth brow. His was round with a pointed chin. Her eyebrows arched triumphantly. His were huge hairy dashes that spread almost all the way across his brow. A long slightly tilted nose made her gray eyes look wide apart and startling, but they were saved by being majestic eyes, shot with lights of color. He noticed again his stubby nose; like a girl's, he thought. And the pale lifeless color of his real eye made the exaggerated color of the glass eye morbidly unreal. Sometimes he felt, looking again at his mother, that this striking woman could not really be his parent, could not possibly be mother to such a homely child. But then he remembered the massive eyebrows and squat nose of his father and knew it was true. These two opposites were his parents. Often he longed for his father who had left with the parting words, "May God damn beautiful women who bring such hell by marrying ugly men." And later the short ugly man had died, not long after the divorce and the custody fight. Keith wished he had lived with his father those last few months of his life, instead of here to watch his mother sweep out the door night after night with giant charming men whose hair was always slickly combed. Before she left she always touched him lightly on the cheek with her cold hand and smiled the false smile.

Keith watched her again as she penciled black all around her gray eyes.

"Why do you do that?" He was curious but he also wanted to stop thinking for awhile.

"What?" she asked, absorbed.

"Why do you do that?" He pointed at the pencil, almost jabbing it into her eye.

"My God, Keith! Be careful!" Glancing at his hand and then directing her angry stare straight to his eyes, she yelled, "Look at those fingernails. How did you get dirty already? Filthy! At least you could be clean."

"What?" The boy frowned.

"Clean!"

He moved toward her anxiously. Desperately he tried to talk, "But you said at least. That means I'm *not* something else so at *least* I could be"

"For God's sake, Keith. I want you to be clean, that's all. Go do something, will you? You make me nervous staring into the mirror."

And later she moved into the night with one of the slick sweet-smelling young men and left Keith to the sour apple cider-drinking woman who stayed with him so she could watch color TV all night. Only tonight she did not immediately switch on the television set. She sat and smiled at him for a long time, her pointed old face screwed up in a silly grin. "Well," she heaved finally. "Well, well."

Keith nervously fingered a satin bow on the davenport and felt her eyes on him.

"Well, Boy. I haven't seen you for some time. Since your" She stopped and looked away, then back to him. "I suppose this is your last real vacation day away from school. I mean it being Saturday and your mama always having guests and parties for her friends on Sundays. You've had quite a long time away from school, haven't you? Quite a long vacation."

"Yes." Keith's answer was short. He didn't want to talk.

"I suppose you ain't anxious to get back."

"No," he answered.

"I knew a fella' once had a glass eye," she said suddenly.

"Couldn't tell it if he wouldn't have taken it out all the time. Took it out a lot. Made me sick but you know, you get used to it, I suppose. He was used to it."

"Sure," Keith spoke quietly.

Curiously the woman leaned closer to him, spraying him with her cider breath. "Can you take yours out?"

"No!" Keith almost yelled but quieted, his breathing shaky. "I'm not supposed to the doctor says."

"Oh," the woman said, disappointed, and switched on the TV.

Keith went to his room and stared into the black night from his window. He thought about tomorrow and playing piano at his mother's Sunday party and how he hated it. Then, with that shaky queasy feeling in his stomach, he thought of Monday and returning to school. He knew his classmates would ask the same questions as his babysitter. When Willie Jenson broke his arm, they'd all asked him a million questions. And the girl in fifth grade with the false leg had cried when Tommy Wilcox asked her to take it off one day. They all knew, of course, Mrs. Harper, the teacher, had false teeth from the way they clicked when she talked and one day some girl had seen her in the girls' lavatory with all her top teeth out. Keith, along with the others, wanted to see those teeth just once.

Now, sick and frightened, he knew they would ask him to take out the eye, the crazy eye that made him even uglier, that refused to move or look straight ahead or be the right color. The eye made him a more imperfect boy, more of a disappointment to that statue that was his mother.

Then, to stop the horrid feeling in his stomach, Keith turned to the ships in bottles his father had made for him. Once his father had sailed and out of this short experience of youth came glamorous stories to tell his son. Keith loved the stories and the ships and dreamed of being a pirate, or, if he had to, an honest admiral, but he liked the pirate idea best. When he was five his father had taken him away from the landlocked Midwest for a visit to the coast just so Keith could see the ocean, the shining splendid crashing sea that swelled and heaved itself upon the shore and then retreated into itself. All the time he watched it, standing on the beach

with his father, he thought of all the fish, the life, the movement and the excitement his father had assured him was in its depths. And now he thought of living upon its enormity, its strength and magic power and moving with it, through it, atop it, letting it take him where it willed and never touching land again and feeling only the chill of the sharp salt air. From his ship he could smell the green plant smell, the fish smell and the free, wild smell of the sea and never again would his nose be repelled by sweet bottled smells and never again would his heart be chilled by the touch of a cold hand on his cheek.

"Now," he said to himself, "I'll make a good pirate. With a patch over my bad eye and everything." And he tried to laugh but he wept and fell asleep holding the shiny bottle with its miniature treasure.

On Sunday morning preparations were begun for his mother's weekly party, a tea that usually turned into a cocktail hour that swelled into a drunken roar with Keith afraid and sad in his room. On this Sunday Keith did not escape the preparations. He even helped, trying not to think of going to school the next day. As he took out the fancy little napkins he wished he had one more free Saturday before he had to face the kids again. He wanted one more great Saturday, since he'd been cheated out of three, to go to the crumbling dock and help old Mr. Wyatt mend his rowboat or just sit with him in his shack and talk about the sea. Mr. Wyatt spent Sundays at church meetings so Keith was stuck.

All morning he kept seeing himself in the dozens of mirrors his mother had filling the house. He would look up and gaze into the steady eye or turn around and suddenly see the bright blue.

At two the people started coming. Sensing their pity and feeling their curious looks, Keith stepped swiftly out of their way. Suddenly, he knew he couldn't stand it. Shortly after the first guests arrived, he fled. Once outside he ran into the sharp autumn wind, the sun and the wild smell of autumn. He ran until it hurt terribly to breathe but on he ran to Mr. Wyatt's shack by the river. He beat on the door but no one answered.

All afternoon the little river moved gently, quietly, be-

neath Keith's un-seeing eyes. All afternoon he thought of the school day coming and of once beautiful Saturdays and old dreams of the sea. He thought of his father and how long it had taken him to escape the cold clutches of his mother. Of how his father loved the sea but worked in a dry, dull office for that woman and his boy. And he thought of Mr. Wyatt, who came as close to the sea as this tiny river, who had lived eighty-two years and had gotten only to this river. And then it was not thinking at all. Just sitting, not moving or seeing.

Finally dusk came and Keith's sight came alive for a moment. He remembered that sunset of the day he and his father stood on the shore of the great ocean. Blue flowed into warm red and gold and then all melted into the green warmth of the sea, into a beautiful union with the great sea.

The rope slipped easily from the tired pole and the small boat drifted away from the shore. Boxes had not been hard to find. Mr. Wyatt had plenty sitting around outside the shack. He sat on them to fish. And a few heavy rocks on the shore helped but it would take awhile, a few minutes, and meanwhile the rowboat drifted downstream.

It is not hard for a boy to drift off at sunset on Sunday, without really thinking of anything, anything at all, just moving surely, knowing with an intolerable knowledge that tomorrow cannot come. Tomorrow must not come. And knowing just as surely but not consciously thinking it, that the sea is too far away, so far away and it takes so long to get there. Knowing, then, that the sea will not exist for him, at least not until after those painful tomorrows that cannot be faced, that promise so little time to be alone, to be free. And drifting with that orange sun being swallowed by the little river and seeing just that beauty, not looking ahead to anything or wanting to. Just drifting into that special miracle of a sunset and seeing nothing more. And thinking of the sound of the ocean splashing against the rocky shore and crashing against itself with all its power. And loving that roaring sound and that soaring strength. It is not hard for a child to die late Sunday afternoon when Saturday is so far away.