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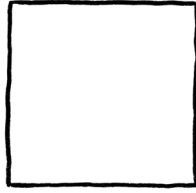
THE RULES OF SEEING

Written by **Joe Heap**

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One

January

KATE IS HOLDING A white square with both hands. A piece of paper. She will remember this later, in the hospital. She will try to remember if she could see anything through the folded paper – handwriting, perhaps, or printed words, or a restaurant bill. But these details will not come back. The square will remain a perfect blank, a square cut from the fabric of her memory.

Details that will return:

- 1) His breath.
- 2) His aftershave, petrol-smelling.
- 3) His body, which despite her six-foot-one frame seems to tower over her.

There is a long moment where neither of them moves, and the only sound she is aware of is her own heartbeat, whooshing in her ears.

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‘Give it to me.’

‘Why? Why are you so angry?’

‘Give it to me.’ This is all he will say, over and over, as though he’s broken.

‘Tony, you’re scaring me.’ She says it with a laugh, because it is silly that she should be scared by him.

‘Give it to me.’ He advances another step. Kate forces herself not to step back, to stand her ground.

They have fought before, are even proud of their fighting. Marriages are supposed to be passionate. Her husband has a temper, but better than someone who doesn’t give a damn, right? Their fights are loud. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes they throw things. But this is different – it is the silence, the way he won’t say anything, the way the air in the room seems to be running out.

‘Give it to me.’

‘No. What is it?’ That is all she wanted to know, from the moment she saw the white square. One moment they were chatting in the kitchen. Kate had already been out of bed for an hour, chopping carrots and celery for a stew and listening to the morning radio. Most of the news was about New Year’s celebrations the night before. They had stayed up long enough to see the fireworks.

Tony had come in, showered and dressed for work, and they had talked. Everything normal, normal, normal, until the moment he reached into his wallet to take out a note to pay for the groceries.

Tony’s wallet is black leather, with PROPERTY OF THE METROPOLITAN POLICE in faded silver letters. There is a badge with ‘police’ written in Braille. The square of white

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paper had fallen out of the wallet's inner compartment, onto the kitchen tiles.

In the hospital, she will remember the white square like a hole in the floor. Like a hole that might open up, a hole she might fall through, into endless white sky. But she does not feel this yet.

She bent down to pick it up. She was going to hand it to him, but then she noticed the tension in his body, and before she could say anything—

‘Give it to me.’

‘Why? What have you got to hide?’ She smiled, holding the folded piece of paper to her chest playfully. But he wasn’t smiling.

‘Give it to me.’

‘What is it?’ Still playful – still expecting this to be a game, wondering if this is a surprise for her. A printout for airline tickets maybe, or the receipt for a present. Maybe he has bought something to go in the new flat that she has been renovating for them both. Mundane objects, mundane desires. Remembering them later, she will feel disgusted with herself.

The air in the room is choked with his aftershave; she can’t breathe. She used to like the aftershave, but now it’s as though she’s locked in a garage with the car running

and running

and running.

Both her thumbs are on the piece of paper, her arms tucked close to her body. She will not let him have it. Kate needs to know what’s written on the paper. She will stand her ground.

When he lunges forward, trying to grab the paper out of her hands, she steps back as a reflex. She has forgotten the

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crate of wine bottles that she placed on the floor by the sink. Kate stumbles back, already falling, the white square clutched over her heart.

She lands, the back of her head slamming into the floor. There is a moment of bright pain, like a lightbulb blowing, then darkness.



‘This place is great – they have a sandwich named after me!’

It is late morning, and the Soho lunch crowd is starting to form. Nova is swinging her brother’s hand back and forth like a pendulum. The air smells richly of coffee and toasting bread.

‘You’re joking, right?’ Alex looks at her.

‘Nope. Check the board.’

He looks up. On the order board, below *Chicken Club* and above *Hawaiian Special*, is *The Safinova Surprise*.

Alex laughs, shaking his head. ‘What did you do to deserve a sandwich named after you?’

She breaks her hand away, mock-offended.

‘Excuse you, but what haven’t I done? I think I’m very deserving of sandwich fame.’

Alex raises an eyebrow, though she can’t see this. ‘Seriously, what did you do?’

‘Check out the ingredients.’

Alex gazes up at the board.

“*The Safinova Surprise* – pepperoni, pickles and peach slices.”

His brow furrows. ‘Did you . . . invent that sandwich?’

‘I had a hunch that foods starting with the same letter naturally belonged together – that you sighted people used

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words of the same letter because they were similar. So, I came in here and ordered one. Hallelujah – a sandwich was born.’

‘But, peach slices?’

‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.’

‘I don’t think that’s going to happen.’

‘It’s not for the faint of heart. Maybe one day you’ll be ready.’

‘Do many people buy your sandwich?’

‘Just her.’ They’ve gotten close enough to the counter for their conversation to be overheard and Mike Zephirelli – broad and black-bearded like a cartoon pirate – calls over to them.

‘Mike! Looking good!’ She waves her folded white stick at him and he explodes with laughter. This joke, in all its variations – *Looking good. Good to see you. Have you been working out?* – never grows old. Alex rolls his eyes, another thing his sister can’t see.

‘How you doing, Nova? You want the usual?’

‘Yes, please.’ She turns to Alex, grinning. ‘Extra peach slices, please.’

‘And for you, sir?’

‘Oh, um . . . an egg and cress roll.’

Zephirelli chuckles. ‘She’s never convinced any of her girlfriends to get the sandwich, either.’ With that, he swings away to start making their food.

‘You bring dates here?’

‘Sure. Wouldn’t you want to sleep with someone who had a sandwich named after them? Come on – find a table; my feet are killing me.’

Alex finds a table and Mike brings the coffee.

‘So, what did you want to talk about?’ Nova asks. ‘Not that

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I mind – it's good to eat somewhere other than the Scotland Yard canteen.'

'Tell me about it – hospital food is as bad as its reputation.'

Nova smiles but says nothing – she is waiting.

'So, I wanted to tell you about something. Something I read in a journal . . . an operation.'

She frowns, still smiling. 'What kind of operation, doctor? Are you trying to get me lobotomized?'

He ignores the joke. 'An operation that could cure you. I mean . . . restore your sight.'

He knows that 'restore' is the wrong word – you can't restore something that was never there. This is the moment that their sandwiches arrive, and Nova stays silent. When she speaks again, her voice is quiet.

'What are you talking about?'

'Eighty percent, maybe more.'

'Chance of seeing something?'

'Chance of seeing *everything*.'

Her brother's voice, so familiar to Nova, is made exotic by excitement.

'That's . . . a bold claim.'

'Yes' – she can hear him smiling – 'but true.'

She sits back, kicking her Doc Martens under her chair. The quick echoes of their words tell her that they are in a corner booth. He is trying to judge her reaction. When she speaks, she feels like an actor, her responses pre-prepared.

'Most people think of blindness as darkness.'

'I know. But you can see black and white, and red in good light . . . '

'No, that's not what I mean.' Her hands form shapes in

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front of her, which Alex guesses are supposed to convey hesitation, or thought. 'People think of blindness as binary, as an on-or-off switch. Either you can see or you're blind, right?'

'I . . . guess so.'

'But it's a spectrum. Even if you can see, you can only see a tiny portion of all the light that's really there. Did you know that? I've always found that comforting, in a stupid way. It's cool.'

Alex says nothing. He's looking at his sister, in her biker jacket and *I Want to Believe* T-shirt, wondering how she can still infuriate him this much, after all these years. Her ridiculous sandwich is sitting in front of her, with a toothpick Union Jack flag claiming it for Britain, oozing sweetness onto the plate.

'Just think about it for a second. You feel the heat of the sun, like I do, but you can't see the infrared light glowing off my skin. And you can't see radio waves, even though you know that when you turn the radio on, you'll hear the breakfast news. And it's all made of the same stuff – you just call the bit you can see "light". But it's *all* light. Fizzing around our heads. Even at night when you can't see your hand in front of your face, there's light shining all around.'

She's grinning like she can see it – all the extra light. Alex looks around the café, at the chrome counter and the vinyl seating, as though searching for backup. He grunts, smoothing his eyebrows with thumb and forefinger.

'Stop being . . .'

'What?'

'A smartarse.'

Nova smirks. 'I have a point though, right?'

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‘This is medicine, not science-fiction, Jillian.’

She huffs. ‘Nobody calls me *Jillian* but you.’

‘Would you rather I called you *The Safinova Surprise* – pepperoni, pickles and peach slices?’

‘Now who’s the smartarse?’

‘Look, I’m not saying this would even work, but it’s a straightforward choice. Either you can stay blind, or maybe you can be cured. This isn’t a mind game, or a riddle; it’s about being able to read a map or look at your outfit in a mirror. What’s so complicated?’

She shakes her head, dark hair tumbling over her face.

‘What could be more complicated? How do you learn to see? Because all that extra light, those X-rays and cosmic rays and radio waves – they’re all *really there*, Alex. This big field of pure light is rippling all around you, right now, and you can’t see it.’

Alex says nothing. He’s watching her face, her body, reading silently in a language she doesn’t know. Nova goes on.

‘So, say I’m an alien, and . . . and I’ve got big ol’ bug eyes! I can see all those extra colours, so your puny human vision seems pathetic to me. I could “cure” you with my ray gun because, to me, you seem to need curing – and you would see *all* the light. Night would be like day, shining with colours you’ve never seen before . . .’ She pauses for effect. ‘What would you see? Would you understand it all? Would it scare you, Alex?’

He sighs, grasping her meaning reluctantly.

‘You were always good with words.’ He is quiet for a minute. ‘I can’t tell you what it would be like for you to see, any more than I can tell you what music would sound like to a man who’d been deaf from birth. I can find you case studies, first-

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person accounts. But I'm a doctor, not a poet. You need to ask a philosopher. Or an imam.'

Nova pouts. 'You know I don't do that.'

Neither of their parents is religious. The source of Alex's faith has always puzzled Nova. He'd tried Buddhism, then Christianity, and had settled on Islam as though he'd been shopping around for the best deal. It interested her for a while, mostly for the words.

'I know, but the question you're asking isn't medical. What was the line from the Qur'an you used to recite to me?'

She knows the one he means. 'No vision comprehends Him, but He comprehends all vision.'

He smiles at the memory, but she doesn't see this. 'Yes. Maybe your "extra light" is like that. Like God.'

It's her turn to sigh. 'You know what I think, doctor.'

'Yes, I do.' His tone hardens to something smooth and professional. She tries to win him back.

'In your case studies, how do people react? Are they happy?'

He doesn't say anything for a minute, and when he does, Nova knows he isn't telling the whole truth.

'They find it difficult, but they recover. Anyway, it's your decision to make. If you want, I can refer you to someone who knows more about the procedure.'

'Okay, but one thing.'

'Yes?'

She leans closer to the table, grabs her sandwich, and takes a huge bite. Through stuffed cheeks, she says, 'If you tell our sweet, Pakistani mother about this "cure", I will destroy you.'



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Kate wakes on the sofa. There is a blanket over her. The lights in the flat are off, and the sky she can see through the front window is dull. How long has she slept? She doesn't remember. The sun is setting so it must be about four. There is no sign or sound of Tony.

She remembers the fall, and the argument that preceded it. Lastly, she remembers the piece of paper, a white square.

Experimentally, she turns her head, but the sinews in her neck are like high-tension wires. Her head aches, predictably, but there is a spot at the back of her skull where she can feel nothing at all. She reaches back and touches it, just to make sure her head is still there. She looks at her fingers, but there is no blood.

Slowly, feeling the strain of supporting her head, she sits up. She's queasy, but she doesn't feel like she's going to pass out again. Kate is certain now – Tony put her on the sofa and left the flat. Why did he do that? She was unconscious. He should have taken her to the hospital. A wave of sluggish anger rises, then subsides. She's too sick to be angry.

Kate goes to the kitchen, swallows painkillers with a glass of milk to line her stomach, and puts the radio on, half listening from the table.

After a while, as though on a whim, she gets up and walks through to the study. She doesn't know why. She reaches into the space behind the bureau and pulls out a black art folder. It is scuffed and dusty, and a peeling sticker on one corner reads, 'Katerina Tomassi, 7F 8F 9F'. She unzips the folder and opens it with a sound like dead leaves.

She hasn't looked at the folder since they moved to the flat, hasn't looked inside it in even longer. Now Kate can see the

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colours of her old paintings – watercolours, acrylics and pencils. She can see a tree, and a still life of fruit and acorns. She does not touch any of the paintings, as though they might stain her, or as though she might stain them. When was the last time she painted? It must have been . . .

Kate zips up the folder again, replaces it behind the bureau, and returns to the living room. On the sofa by the window, she listens to the traffic outside, while the contents of her head shift and rearrange.