

Refuge

by P.E. Rowe

I'm sorry, love, but you cannot teach wisdom. You're going to have to walk it. I can only impart a sense of what you need to know. You're going to need to experience the rest. What I can tell you is how I learned that difficult lesson, and maybe that will help you keep an open mind about your own ignorance. That's an important thing to understand as you grow.

Right now, you are two years old. Your favorite food is pureed bananas. You adore Red, your guardian, who is helping you improve your vocabulary each day. You also named your stuffed dog Inira, after yourself. I can't imagine what goes on in that miraculous little head of yours. I see you now, and I want to teach you what I've learned over the past few months. It's so important yet so far beyond you.

Red told me to set a date, asked me, “When do you think she would be ready? I can store this lesson and impart it to her when she comes of age.” And just like he is helping you with your vocabulary, he has helped me craft this narrative. I was never much of a writer. I thought it would also be fun for you, as a young adult, when you get this, to come to know me for who I was then. I am twenty-seven now, a few years older than the age I told Red you would be ready to learn about war. At least, I hope you will not have to know anything about war before then.

What I knew about war before I met Devian Gilbert I learned in history lessons. I never understood why people would fight one another to the death. The idea seems insane as I write it. And to do so programmatically, almost as part of an encoded manner of being in our makeup, it makes no sense to a person who has lived in a

society that has not seen war erupt directly in their presence. War is the most abstract concept until it isn't. And when it does happen, from what I've been told by the survivors, is that it's almost unbelievable that it is actually happening, actually real.

Devian Gilbert was real, though. I could see him, treat him, touch him, be touched by him. He was my patient, a boy whose family was living on a mining outpost called Reveen, a small nothing moon of metal being stripped for its resources, so far from any zone of conflict that the people there hadn't the slightest worry that the war would ever come to touch them. They were an independent colony near Etteran space that sold wholesale metals to the Etterans, but Reveen's people were not Etterans themselves.

When the war arrived, it was devastating. The miners were defenseless. The Trasps demanded that they abandon their home, which they

refused to do. They knew the Trasps wouldn't try to hold such a small mining outpost so close to Etteran territory, and it had not been the Trasps' way to do harm to neutral non-military targets. The people of Reveen would have sold their metal to the Trasps just as readily as to the Etterans. But war, above all else, is unpredictable. The Trasps razed the outpost, rendering the mining colony inoperable, and for good measure, they nuked the moon, ensuring that the fallout would prevent the Etterans from mining the moon in the future. Devian Gilbert was on that moon when they nuked it. He survived the blast. His family did not.

Devian would have died if not for the Semmistratum, a cultural order Devian's people traded with. They found the colony smoldering and located stranded survivors, extricated them to off-world hospital ships that served refugees of the Etteran war.

Devian Gilbert was in such rough shape he was nearly left for dead. There was debate among the medics about whether he was even treatable. Had he been older, they'd probably have left him, but even in war there are rules, and one of those rules is that people value children more than they value adults. The Semmistratum gave Devian a fighting chance, and he fought, which was how, eventually, he came to me, four weeks before your second birthday.

When I first set eyes on him, he had already been through nearly eighteen months of treatment, most of it thought to be pointless. Even with the most aggressive gene therapy and armies of nanotech coursing through his bloodstream, the boy didn't regain consciousness. He was with the best doctors the Semmistratum had on their medical ships, and when he did not improve, they asked if someone in Carrol's system could take him when

they stopped here to resupply. Thousands of light years from Reveen, tens of thousands of light years from Etterus or Trasp, the war brought us an orphan, right here to Hellenia, and he'd slept through the whole journey.

Our medical intelligence set to work saving him, and in the early days, the consensus was the same as the doctors from the Semmistratum. There was little indication he would ever regain consciousness. I never would have met him if not for the miracle that he did. They'd re-grown and transplanted nearly every major organ, rebuilt legs that had been stripped of their tissues and broken to bits, encouraged skin regeneration that had failed and desquamated over and over. He was on artificial respiration and functionally braindead. Yet somehow, the algorithms always turned away from the red line, always pointed to one more attempt, one more procedure, until one day, Devian finally woke. And he

said no more. When he finally spoke, that's what he said. No.

That was when the machines called me.

Their protocol demanded a human guardian. He was a minor, and without a legal guardian of his own, one needed to be appointed. With his complicated medical history, the state appointed both a legal guardian and a physician as a medical proxy. That was how I came to meet Devian Gilbert.

He was a wisp of bones and pale skin. He had scar tissue all up and down his body. There'd been more skin grafts than I'd ever seen on a single person, and on such a small young person. I found myself struggling to keep my emotions in check during that first exam. His face was bandaged, covering over his right eye, the socket of which had been reconstructed completely, with heavy scarification running down his right cheek all the way to the jaw. Yet when I turned his head the other

way, I could see him, see what he'd looked like before his body had been so decimated by trauma, by radiation, by heat and then neglect and inactivity. Still there was radiance in his being that told me there was a reason this child had not died.

He did not speak much, but he listened. I told him that I was there to help him, was his guardian, would make decisions for him, to help him recover. I asked him if he understood.

"No," he said. "No nanotech. Nothing invasive. No genetech."

"But if it had not been for all of those things, Devian, you'd have died long ago," I told him.

"That was beyond my control, doctor," he said. "I was unaware. Now I know. My family and I, we are Purists."

"There is much we could do now that you're recovering. Your eye for instance. The optic nerve is still somewhat intact and can be recovered. You could see again."

“I see enough,” he said. “I’m very tired. Please no more today.”

“I’ll leave you to your rest, Devian. It was great to meet you. We can discuss this more later.”

He didn’t answer but seemed to tail off in attention, or perhaps he fell asleep. I walked out slowly in case he might say more. He didn’t that day.

That night I cried my eyes out for that boy. What those Trasps had done to him and his people was an abomination. I kept wondering why, why? With all the places in the universe we can get metal? Devian’s people would have mined it for them. Why kill them over resources?

When he found me crying, your father had a different take, eternal economist that he is. People don’t usually fight to protect resources they haven’t already invested in. You fight and die for your home because it’s yours, because you’ve spent years living there, improving it, cherishing it.

Even a metal pile like Reveen meant something to Devian Gilbert's people, because they'd spent years living off it.

To nuke it, though? No one could explain that away.

When I saw Devian later that week, he was far more alert. He apologized.

"I h- haad no idea who you were, Dr. Lee. You must understand h- how many doctors I've seen. It's difficult to tell the important ones."

"Why do you think I'm so important?"

"They say you'll make decisions for me."

"I can, yes."

"So you can stop them. I don't want a new eye."

"I'm happy to talk about it, Devian. I'd like to know why you've told the medtechs to stop using genetech and nanotech."

"I told you," he said. "We're Purists."

“We were all Purists at one point in our history or we’d most likely have been uploaded by now.”

“Or we wouldn’t exist at all,” he said.

“Or, yes, maybe we wouldn’t exist, at least as biological beings.”

“My people on Reveen, we were religious. I still am.”

“Would God be angry at you for accepting a new eye, perhaps one that wasn’t his?”

Devian recoiled, shaking his head. “God is not a child, Dr. Lee, and neither am I. At least...we were miners. That doesn’t mean we were unsophisticated people. I’m educated. I like philosophy. I read.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m fifteen now. I was thirteen when Reveen was attacked.”

“And you’ve been unconscious for almost two years, which means you were very much a child when this happened to you.”

“No. Not out there. We were serious people. It takes serious people to live where we lived, and if any one of us failed in our responsibilities, people died. I know what serious decisions are. I should be allowed to make them for myself. If you give me an eye, I would be compelled to remove it.”

“Remove it?”

“No more genotech. No more nanotech.”

“But you will be blind.”

“My body will repair itself as much as it will, and my mind will make up the difference.”

“Perhaps if you explained to me, helped me to understand.”

“Did you not read about this, your h-hi-history?”

“I have, but there have been so many perspectives on Purism and biological integrity over the centuries. I’d like to hear you explain where you come down on the matter. It will help me to understand you better, Devian.”

“Somewhere between Nena Gilberto and your namesake, doctor, Abe Lee. Gilberto wrote about the slaves of Rome. Some men spent their entire lives chained in the belly of a trireme, powering the war engine of the machine that enslaved them. Some toiled in mines, long before machines did such labor.

“Lee said, if you are stuck living in one place, you can either lament your limitations and spend your life in misery, or you can embrace the beauty of the small place you inh- ha- habit. And you can live a ha- happy life wherever you are. My philosophy is something of the two. If I am blind, I will see what I will. My life will h- ha- have the same value seeing what little I can.”

“I’ve noticed you have an aphasia, a difficulty speaking.”

“Yes,” he said, “a problem with the eighth letter of the alphabet, but only at the beginning of words it seems. I am

trying to adapt, but some very useful words start with that letter. I am trying to decide whether to learn synonyms or whether the problem will be permanent.”

“Our speech therapists and neurologists can help you with that.”

“H- he- help is one of those useful words. Aid. Support. Um... Guidance, maybe.”

“I’ve heard from the other doctors that you have another rather unique symptom, Devian.”

“The colors?”

“Yes, the colors. Can you tell me about them?”

“I’ve been seeing colors, Dr. Lee. In my dead eye. The medtechs think it had something to do with the radiation and the treatments.”

“It’s very interesting.”

“They told me it sometimes happens to healthy people, with music or numbers. Something about sensory signals getting mixed up.”

“We’re going to take very good care of you, Devian. We want you to feel at home here now.”

“H- have you decided that I’m capable of making my own decisions?”

“About your eye?”

“About everything?”

I smiled. “We don’t need to make any decisions today, Devian. For now, let’s just take it one day at a time, okay?”

“Thank you for coming, Dr. Lee.” he said.

My focus then, as I began to get to know Devian, was to steer him toward the course I thought best for him. I believed I could convince him to accept implantation of a new eye, whether it was re-grown for him from his own genetic material or a neurotech implant mattered very little to me. But I thought I could convince him that he needed to see. That first real substantive meeting convinced me only that it would be a greater challenge than I had anticipated.

Over the following weeks, he didn't move off his position, and to gain his trust, I acceded to his request to keep him off nanotech and geneteck interventions. He was progressing well enough in other areas without pressing the issue, and he seemed to be adjusting well to the realities of his new life. His mood according to the grief counselor seeing him was about as upbeat as one could have expected. He ranged from profound sadness for the loss of his family and his home to one of gratitude for a second chance at life. Nothing about it seemed performative. Devian, more than anything, was genuine.

It was nearly two months after he regained consciousness that Devian walked out of the medical center. His vision was seriously impaired in his left eye and absent in the right. The optics technicians had fitted him with a set of glasses that maximized his limited vision, flashing different warning

lights in his left eye that helped him to discern approaching objects and the outlines of walkways and doors. He also wore a camera on a necklace that vocalized and vibrated in certain situations. All of these external technological interventions made me wonder why Devian was so hesitant to accept similar technological interventions that were smoother and better integrated with his neurology. An eye would be all but unnoticeable to both him and others. The only barrier to it was Devian himself.

His story had gained enough attention in Hellenia that Devian had many families offering to take him in. I and his counselor discussed it with him and his legal guardian, and we all agreed that even though we could set him up on his own with his guardian and counselors checking in on him, it would be healthy for him to be a part of a family. He chose a family situated in a lower density neighborhood in

Mentor, just outside the capitol of Gracia.

I saw him again at my office about a week after he'd moved to Mentor. He didn't want to talk about his medical status, more about how he was adjusting to life on Hellenia.

"I'd known of Dreeson's Star," he told me, "but never Carrol's, and not this planet."

"It's the rings," I said. "Dreeson's rings are much flashier than our humble little planet."

"With the rings I could at least visualize where I am. In this city, if it weren't for the directions from my glasses, I wouldn't know where I am most of the time, just some point on a matrix."

"Have you done anything interesting since you've moved to Mentor?"

"I met a girl," he said.

"A girl?"

"A neighbor. She's very sweet."

"A girlfriend?"

Devian shrugged. "We'll see."

"What's her name?"

"Tally. Tally Companus."

"I knew you were a charmer," I said, "but you work fast."

"Two years in a coma puts things in perspective, Dr. Lee. Nothing promised and all that."

"Fair enough," I said. "Have you given much thought to what we talked about last time."

"None at all. I know what I think. It's up to you to respect my feelings or not respect them."

"I'm not sure I would look at it quite that way, Devian. I don't want to force anything on you."

"But I can tell, you'd like it if I let the medtechs build me a new eye."

"It would certainly make your adjustment and your life here easier."

"Maybe," Devian said. "But my glasses were the reason Tally came to talk to me in the first place. She saw me struggling across a busy walkway and

then we spent the afternoon together. Could be that never occurred if I could see.”

“What did you two do together that day?”

“I was on my way to the AgScreen, and she came with me. All our food on Reveen was imported. I’ve never been anywhere like He- Hellenia before where they grow food. It smelled incredible in there. Fresh, like where the air was born. The technicians love me there now.”

“Why is that?”

“I asked them if I could try everything. By the time all the food got to us at the mines, all the flavor’s gone out, just salt and sugar. At the AgScreen, you can smell things for what they are, taste things the way they were meant to taste. They gave me a carrot, and I’d eaten soups with carrots or dried salad, but I didn’t really know what a carrot tasted like until three days ago. It was incredible.”

“Carrots?”

“Yeah. You don’t know these things and maybe I’m the blind one, but maybe there’s also things I can see that are right before everyone in this place, and they miss them.”

“Are you worried that might change if you could see again?”

“I’m worried about that regardless. You can only taste a cherry for the first time once.”

I smiled. “I love cherries,” I said. “I could eat a million of them and never grow tired of the taste.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m grateful. I really am. I told them I’d like to volunteer there, learn ways I can be useful to them, maybe learn to grow fruit too someday.”

“What if there were sights here you were missing too, Devian? Would you maybe want to see them? Like Tally, maybe? Maybe the greens at the AgScreen? The crossing in Gracia

center has its own kind of spectacular beauty.”

He paused before answering. “Is it difficult for you to choose, Dr. Lee? You seem to be struggling with this decision.”

“I have a daughter. She’s two. I make a lot of decisions for her and they’re not very difficult decisions. I’ve gotten used to making the easy decisions for her. Bedtime is bedtime or she’ll be cranky tomorrow. Two-year-olds would make a lot of bad choices if adults didn’t step in.”

“Maybe teenagers too,” Devian said. “I certainly made mistakes on Reveen.”

“Maybe teenagers need to make mistakes so they can learn from them.”

“But I don’t think conforming to a belief system that I’m willing to sacrifice for is a mistake.”

“I know what I would do if you were my daughter,” I said. “I would fix her eyes, Devian. I would want her to see.”

“Even if it meant violating your daughter’s most sincere beliefs?”

“I can’t see her in you, Devian. All I can see is her sweet, two-year-old face. And I can’t stand the thought of her face being...well—”

“Let’s call it all banged up,” Devian said. “I understand. The universe breaks every beautiful thing it makes. And she’ll grow. The decisions, they get tougher too.”

“Yes, they do.”

I was so stunned by the staggering wisdom in this young philosopher that I was fooled by him, fooled by his stoic humor, by his composure, by his insistence on principle. I couldn’t see past it because I was a child myself. I’d never known pain, not here on Hellenia, insulated kingdom of wonder and hope. I couldn’t see it hidden there behind his wounded eyes, the facial muscles that had melted and been restructured only passably. I thought there was still a decision to be made.

That night, I talked to your father, Inira, about the thoughts I'd had speaking with Devian that day, about the possible world where you were the broken one, and your father held me as I cried tears of recreational emotion, playacting as we were. And I thought about fixing Devian, repairing those eyes so he could see the universe as whole once more. The taste of fruits and the colors of stained-glass windows. I dreamt of flowers and woke to the smell of coffee and toast.

When I saw him again two weeks later, I thought he would take the news as he'd taken everything else, like a young man wise beyond his years. I couldn't have expected how wrong I was or how foolish I had been, for I knew nothing of war or even of true grief.

He was silent when I spoke of our protocols and our charge, how fixing people was our duty, when in balance it is a greater good for the patient,

when it will cause no harm to do so. I wasn't even sure that he was crying when I saw something small that looked like a teardrop fall from his chin. He had turned what gaze remained away from me, and his missing eye, the one facing me, could no longer produce tears. Still he didn't speak.

“Devian, I can see you're disappointed. But I've discussed this with my team, your therapist Dr. Kern. We agree that long-term for you, it gives you the best chance of recovery.”

It was the last thing I was expecting. He laughed. “Do with me what you will, doctor. Recovery.”

And he shook his head.

“Devian, I'm here for you. I'm listening and I'd like to hear what you have to say, but I can't help you if you don't share what's bothering you with me. I get the sense that your unwillingness to let us treat you, your vision, that there's more there than you've been willing to say, that you

don't want to see so you don't have to see, so you can hide in there, keep whatever you're hiding to yourself."

"What would you do, brave doctor Lee? Stick your h- head out? Pass judgement on me, though, because what? Some committee decided that because I haven't been alive eighteen years yet, I'm unfit to decide for myself? Better you decide then, right?"

"Devian, we only want what's best for you."

"You tell me then, the people who pulled me off the floor, did they do that because it was best for me, or did they do it because they didn't possess the courage to do what was best for me? And now you're going to make me look people in the eye and smile at them for the rest of my life because that's what's best for me now? If that's what makes you feel good about yourself, doctor."

I listened. I was trained to listen, to let the patient talk, to try and get him to speak through his trauma. And when

he failed to speak, to try and help him to speak.

“Devian, do you wish the Semmi-stratum hadn’t rescued you?” I said.

“Rescued me? Rescued me? Rescued me? Doctor, rescued me?”

“Devian, Dr. Kern said that you didn’t remember what happened to you on Reveen, but that’s not true is it?”

“Could you forget?”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“No, I cannot,” he said. “And if I could, I still wouldn’t. Not in a million years. Not to anyone. Doctor Lee, you h- have a heart and a baby. There are things in this life you’re better off not knowing.”

“I’d like to know, Devian.”

“I’d like to continue to see the world the way I do today.”

“Can you try to tell me?”

“I wish you could see the way I see. If you could try to see what I see. I would rather try that. Maybe you could understand that.”

I went home very confused. And I thought and thought about that discussion we'd had. I thought about the surgery, and I was still convinced that it was the right thing to do, but I knew we couldn't do it until he was ready. I still thought there was such a thing for him as ready. He was grieving. He was working on it. We'd get through it.

When you don't know, you don't know.

I thought of clever things I could do, ways to help. I spoke to high-minded people. I thought back then there were such things as saints. I imagined technological interpretations, devices that might go into my eyes to explain to me the colors of blindness and the feelings of war, the sadness of songs I could weep to, the boundless depths of darkness lurking in bones. Only the universe could open such doors for me. The child I couldn't see before my very eyes was howling with every

exhaled breath, and I mistook him for blind. So I went to the opticians and the prostheticians. What could they tell from my scans of Devian? And they furrowed their brows at me and wondered. I ordered new eyes made for me, and I told that boy I would see the world through his eyes.

He seemed genuinely interested when I told him about the ocular prosthetics I'd had made to mimic his vision. He asked me questions about the contact lenses, how they would fit over my eyes, what I would see, distinctions between the left and the right, which was totally opaque but projected colors in concert with certain stimuli that activated Devian's synesthesia. I hadn't put them in yet. He told me I should wear them for long enough that it seemed normal to me. Days, weeks, he didn't know how long it would take. I told him I would try and see how it went. He wanted to be there with me when I tried them for the first

time. I told him to meet me at my office in the evening, a Friday at the end of the work week. He showed up with Tally Compans, his girlfriend. I couldn't help but see the part of myself in her that had tied us there together that day, and I resented it in her. Vanity abhors the truths in mirrors.

I'd never had anything placed in my eye before. I needed to call the ophthalmologist to help insert the lenses. At first, the lenses themselves felt strange and oddly constricting, as though something physically was at odds with my vision. I had to close my eyes to relax enough that I might open them and see as he saw. Tally Compans said something as we were waiting, that it had been about ten minutes. A pink glow surrounded the left side of my face, the left hemisphere of the world.

"Is that pink for you?" I asked Devian.
"I saw pink."

"You see it?" Devian said.

"Yes, what was it?"

“That was ten,” he said. “Tally said ten. Numbers have colors.”

“Incredible,” I said, as the room erupted in a pink glow after he’d spoken the word ten twice more.

“Wait till you see music,” Devian said.

He wanted to show me the crossing in Gracia. Tally had taken him the previous week as the evening took hold and revelers came out to celebrate the night. Most of the open spaces on this ball of urban heat reflected the ordinary, the needs of the people who lived off the ecumenopolis that was Hellenia—water, air, power, heat. But some spaces spoke to the longing we have in our hearts for beauty, the reverence we have for feeling small. Gracia Crossing was one of those places. I thought there could be no better place to see and not see through Devian’s eyes.

I struggled to make it out of the medical office building adjacent the

hospital. There was vertigo of some kind, dizziness that seemed to be set off by the flashing signals that somehow oriented Devian in the world. I had no idea how to interpret them, so he began to narrate as we progressed down the corridor toward the lift.

“The green line on your right side is actually on your left, so we can walk toward it about a meter before reaching the wall. The gaps are the doorways.”

It was backwards, and I was trying to puzzle out where the damage had to be in the visual pathways for his vision to be experienced this way—optic nerve, primary, secondary, and tertiary visual cortices? But I had no time to think deeply about that neurological curiosity, navigation demanded my attention. I nearly fell. Tally Compans took me by the hand.

“Dr. Lee,” she said. “It’s okay. I won’t let you stray.”

As soon as I had that anchor, it was as though a spinning world became solid under foot. I walked straighter, stood taller. Tally walked me forward toward a wall and stopped me right at it so I could feel. She took me to the edge of a railing at the office's open walkway which I knew and could remember, and I compared it in my mind to what I saw now, something Devian had no chance to experience. This world was all lines, blurred light, and colors to him, no memories to fill in gaps. To say I was blind, though would have been a mischaracterization. I'd have called his vision low resolution, radically different, and dramatically impaired. But Devian could see. And I could see how well he navigated the world compared to me. He was encouraging and a good teacher. On the way over to the crossing, he helped to compare what I was experiencing with his vision, and occasionally, for amusement, he would call out numbers he thought were

beautiful, like five hundred forty-seven. I preferred the symmetry of one thousand and one. Tally pretended to laugh as we did, as though she understood, but I could hear envy in her. I promised her she would have her turn. The perspective was a priceless learning experience. No one could understand the significance of the hazards and barriers until they stepped into the reality Devian lived each day.

It took us three nearly an hour to get down to the crossing. We walked around the shops and eateries and I took the kids to dinner. It was a strange experience to be unable to see my food but to need to feel for it with my utensils and then, when that failed, with my hands. It would take real time to adapt fully to eating that way. I couldn't imagine trying to prepare a meal with those eyes. It made me think of the limitations that would exist for Devian if he wanted to grow fruit. Systems would have to be adapted to

communicate aspects of crop health to him, though I knew such algorithms already existed for harvesting software and hardware.

The most notable change I could discern in my perceptions was an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability. I knew there were no threats here on Hellenia, and the eyes on us were friendly eyes. Even with a small teenage girl as our protector, the eyes around us watching her, I knew, were ready to step in and support her in support of us at the first sign of trouble, whatever that trouble might be. But still, placing myself in such an unknown vulnerable position among strangers, even sympathetic strangers, it felt simultaneously stressful and oddly liberating. I knew they were there watching, yet I couldn't see them, and Devian, I knew was blissfully unaware of how many thousands of onlookers saw us as we approached Gracia Crossing. We walked, and the

crowds parted. The footsteps, the hum, they surrounded us and spread around us like a cloud silently colliding with a mountain. The experience was going well enough that I asked Tally to let Devian and I walk alone together after dinner. I promised her that if we encountered any trouble I would remove the prosthetics and guide Devian home safely with my own sight. Tally was reluctant to go, but when it came to it, Tally was still a minor and did as I told her.

We made our way up to the crow's nest above the grand carousel, where the macro designers flew their birds in the open space and flashing lights over Gracia Crossing. The balcony eighteen stories up hummed now in blue, and I didn't know whether it was the thought of the number eighteen or the distant music floating up from the carousel, and my memory of the Genesis Building lit up in red, a blazing red that Devian said he saw too. We walked the

length of that magnificent causeway, I with one hand on the railing, Devian a step before me remarking on the magnificence of the open space and the sparking presence of the drone pilots' arcing birds. And at ten o'clock the sound system in the plaza began playing music. I felt lines to my left and colors saturating the open spaces, a kaleidoscope of sounds and sensations, feelings. It was like my first time stepping out into space—that sensation of floating at the beginning of infinity and knowing how insignificant you are before it but that all hope of significance begins and ends with your own perception of it. I understood what Devian meant when he said he couldn't explain what had happened to him. This was happening to me now, and I had no hope of explaining it to others. I could see now where Devian was hiding.

We walked along those balconies for two hours listening to the music. We

spoke very little that night. By the time we each headed home, I knew somehow I'd find my way without taking my new eyes out. I slept with the contacts in and looked on your father and on you, my daughter, with Devian Gilbert's eyes the following morning. You were both missing. Your voices, your scents, your warmth, they were present before me in the gaps, but I couldn't see you in those spaces and it felt to me that I had become invisible.

I wore the eyes every last second that I could. Three days after I put the contacts in, a few minutes before I had to step into my first appointment of the week, I removed the prosthetics again and saw with my own eyes. I hadn't yet written a word of my report on Devian, but I knew that to force him against his wishes back to a state we considered neurological and visual normalcy would be nothing short of the same kind of savagery that had destroyed that boy's life in the first

place. I resolved to choke out my fear and say as much to my superiors in the language I knew in my heart best reflected my feelings. In those days I served as his physician, I'd have given up my career, possibly my life for that boy, and I'd only known him a handful of weeks. I thought of him now every time I savored a piece of fruit or the taste of a carrot.

My report was unequivocal. I held nothing back. I refused any operation Devian failed to consent to. I opposed any counseling that advocated positive medical intervention beyond stringent Purist parameters. I quoted philosophy and condemned hypothetical detractors. I'd never seen a document like it in medicine, and I expected it would be a controversy amongst the neurology board. I was correct.

I was called before the fellows and the administration staff to answer for my position. They couldn't fathom the idea that I would neglect to fix a fixable

problem that a child knew no better than to suffer. In their minds, his psychological trauma brought on by the war rendered his judgement suspect. Dr. Kern testified that Devian was blocking any chance of recovery by taking refuge behind his disability. Their consensus was that Devian would never recover if he were allowed to block out the world and hide behind his glasses. They wanted me to concur.

I challenged them to wear the prosthetics. I told them I would resign.

“You’ve gotten too close to this,” Dr. Kern said to the board. “Dr. Lee, with respect, that’s the only way I can explain your behavior. The document you presented to this neuro board is the most unprofessional report I’ve read in my fifteen years as a clinical psychologist.”

“I’ve written what I’ve written,” I said, “and I stand by every word of it. If each of you can’t understand why Devian of all people deserves to make his own

decisions about his present and his future, not only are you not a doctor, you're not even a moral human being, you're just a child walking around with a hammer seeing a nail, completely incapable of resisting the urge to use the hammer, but neither the hammer nor the nail truly belongs to you. I won't be a part of victimizing this boy. I can't make you understand any more than he can tell us the first thing about war. Ignorance is forgivable, but only if we wear it with humility. I will fight this in the courts if need be."

They smiled at me politely and disagreed, but nobody wanted to fight me, not that day. Not on those grounds.

I didn't last much longer at the hospital after that. But Devian Gilbert was never forced into surgery.

I helped him apply for emancipation the following year. His foster family supported him financially through his school years, and the last I'd heard of him, he'd taken work on an Ag

Cylinder in Dreeson's System. I suppose it was easier to start anew again when he was strong enough to do so, rather than to carry the memory of that identity, the boy refugee, the poor broken child we'd taken in. He saw what he saw and he walked.

Years later, I bumped into Tally Compans on the street in Gracia. She'd grown into a lovely young woman, a teacher of elementary Ag Sciences. She told me she still had the ocular prosthetics our neuro team had designed for me, and she asked me if I remembered them. "In so many ways, the things we don't know inevitably define us," I told her. "Devian opened my eyes by teaching me that."

May we always remain ignorant of the right things.

I wanted you to know all this, Inira Lee, my precious daughter, but still I am not sure why. What I did not have the courage back then to explore was the real truth of war. I did not seek out

Devian's medical files from the Semmistratum. I never watched the recordings they had of Reveen. They were then, and I presume still are, an anti-war activist group, peaceful humanitarians. Their most powerful and convincing tool has always been the images, sounds, and accounts of war itself, but I never had the courage to seek out any of that material. Devian Gilbert was enough.

I sometimes still think of the man who gave the order, the Trasp Captain, there, safe in the security of his bridge in the tranquility and darkness of space, suspended in orbit above that tiny moon. That moment he gave the order. Just then.

What monsters live in our hearts, daughter? Where do they come from?

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