



MELISSA STEPHENS

The Eye

STEPHENS

She was tall and dark with delicate hands that expressed her melancholy. They wrought their movements with careful control; when not bid to do anything, they gathered themselves carefully together and folded back to their keeper with a barely concealed nervousness. She lived with her mother and father and younger sister in a miniscule house in the middle of a city park. The park was a dense rain forest sprawl that traveled up and over hills and tiny valleys, bubbling with little streams, and sometimes broke out into fields of tall coarse grass or patches of dense bramble that hid in them a multitude of little creatures. The rain forest waved and fell gently to the ocean in some places; in others it clung indifferently to steep cliff sides. The ocean was dark and blue and full of salt; the beaches sandy in spots, but mostly brimming with curves of shining pebbles of mute and subtle color. The bleached out skeletons of driftwood grinned up at the sky as they reposed at the peak of the shore. Moun-

tains broke the sky in the distance. The girl with the delicate hands loved this place.

The girl had other features. She thought herself pretty, but in a way that felt a bit off; she had thin lips and a chin that indented subtly, and piles of wildly curly dark brown hair that, when untamed, sat on her head almost reluctantly. She was tall and somewhat slight, but with a feminine curve. Her shoulders were always tense; her mouth always straight; her eyes always downcast. She wanted desperately for this to not be the case, but it was. This girl was possessed with sadness. In her brain rested a deep sense of melancholy that sloshed about like pool water and made her thoughts and eyes feel foggy. Through this mess she felt her real self wading, moving slowly and lethargically; she wanted to get out but couldn't. She felt that didn't belong in her own brain, in her own body, in her own self – her brain and her body were a skin that clung tightly to her, chafed against her and refused to be sloughed off. And yet this feeling was very subtle; only on some occasions, during certain deep nights of clarity, did she realize that something was strangling that which made her a real person, that, rather than this melancholy feeling being her natural state, it was rather a sort of sickness which acted to restrict her, to drown who she really was. And this deep struggle was reflected

through her hands. Between the fingers and draping the palms was a tension that expressed how penetrating was her desire to reach out and touch another person; their nervous, intense rigidity spoke too of how afraid they were, and always when they were almost ready to reach out and touch someone, they would slowly and achingly draw back to the girl, clasped together in front of her, or against her chest, or clamped about her torso.

One evening these hands were making a sandwich. Standing upright in the yellow upon yellow galley kitchen of her family's tiny home, the girl, Rona, made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and thought thoughts. She thought of her best friend, who earlier that day had spurned her in the library where they went to school. Their relationship had been edgy as of late and earlier that day it had fallen apart.

"Stop trying to be so deep and sorrowful! It's like you think acting sad all the time is cool or something! It's like you're doing it just to get attention! Stop acting like a stupid little kid!" her friend had shouted, great brown eyes looking at Rona and brimming with angry tears, hands gripping the edges of the study table. The library had gone so quiet it almost echoed; Rona could feel the stares and warm embarrassment of the people in their section floating off of the students in waves, swirl-

ing around the bookshelves toward her.

"I'm not," Rona had said. The words dropped like pebbles. She could smell very faintly the flecks of wet salt falling on her friend's cheeks.

Her friend's eyes darted away from hers.

"Whatever," she said, the last syllable rising waveringly. She relinquished the table and, scooping up her books, turned and rushed out.

Staring down at the two slices of bread on the counter before her, Rona felt the same burning feeling in her chest that she had experienced that morning as she watched her friend flee her. Her eyes were dry, but her chest felt heavy with repressed sobs. Rolling open the yellow drawer in front of her, she pulled out a butter knife and began smearing one slice of bread with peanut butter. Her fingers were rigid and long and graceful, like the knife.

She really wanted to express to her friend, to anybody really, how angry she was with herself. How she, too, thought that the way she had been acting and feeling was almost juvenile and contrived. But her mood and actions were like a spot that won't come out, or the smell of blood; it was no matter that she knew they existed, and that they didn't belong, and that she didn't want them, because they were stains that could not be

purged, no matter how she tried. She would wake up in the morning and try to smile, but just as quickly as it came the smile would wear away, a wisp of smoke, a reluctant ghost, out of place. She had felt this way for so long that the groove of her melancholy that was traced in the record of her every day had worn so deep that she could not escape it. The song of sadness crooned on without end. She felt sad – dejected – depressed – and she couldn't do anything about it, no matter how much she despised herself for feeling this way.

Screwing the top back on the peanut butter, she began scraping the jelly out onto her second slice of bread.

She felt that her melancholy was almost a feeling without reason. It floated all around her and she simply felt it, almost passively, though beneath it all roiled her own anger at its existence. Despite the indistinct feeling of her melancholy, the truth of its existence bloomed deeply in her brain and rose up in front of her until it almost blotted out the world; and it was the idea that the world had lied to her. She didn't know how or when this thought had begun, but it had risen slowly up inside her, growing from some faint green seed until it blotted out the sun and then began to obscure her own identity. The world had lied. *The world had lied.*

Finishing with the knife, Rona tossed it into the sink,

and took the two slices of bread in her hands and forced their ornamented sides together like the wrong ends of a magnet, almost spitefully. She stepped to the dining room table, pulled out a chair which made a stuttering, raking sound, and sat.

Her house was not quiet. The benignly large white plastic orb that hung above the table hummed faintly as it lit the room. Her younger sister was watching television in the next room, only a few feet from her. Somewhere her mother clacked and clicked at the computer. And then of course there was the quiet whirr and rustling blow that accompanies all modern houses everywhere, the sound of mechanical and electronic machines working away with a happy indifference.

The clacking stopped; Rona's mother padded quietly into the dining room and stood framed by the archway which led into the yellow kitchen. Her mother had wide hips and a kind, thin face framed by piles of curly hair just like Rona's, but lighter in color. Rona took an orange out of the bowl in the middle of the table. Her mother pursed her lips. She looked careworn.

"I wish you'd have something better for dinner," Rona's mother reproved gently.

Rona did, too, but as was often the case, did not think she could take much; her stomach was seething with dis-

content and an odd nervousness, which made her feel as though she had swallowed a can of only carbonation.

“I’m not very hungry,” she replied, digging her nails into the orange and peeling away the skin, which made a felt-like scratching sound. She did not look up.

“Okay,” her mother said with a sigh of breath from her nose.

A tiny rope of liquid leapt out of the deep red flesh and onto the pale table top as Rona pulled a piece off of the orange and placed it in her mouth. One of her fingers brushed her lip.

Suddenly, Rona became conscious of how rigidly she held herself; how very slightly her hands shook; how deep her frown had become. She looked up, swallowing. Her mother had taken a seat at the table and was looking at her with blue-gray eyes full of bright sadness.

“Honey, I –”

Rona stood up and stuffed the orange in her jacket pocket.

“I’m going for a walk. I’ll be back later,” she announced, and swiftly left the house, the screen door banging loudly shut behind her.

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She wandered about in the twilight. The forest of

Discovery Park was often her companion. It was criss-crossed throughout with little mud paths that Rona knew by heart; it was her habit to wander the forest almost compulsively. Meandering beneath the intertwined arms of the tall, firm trees served both to amplify and deaden her feeling of melancholy; the exercise and the quiet, the smell of the earth and the wet leaves and the forest air, the gentle hush of the ocean in the distance easily calmed her, but the sweeping, quiet beauty of the forest seemed to squeeze at her heart.

She wanted to reach out to somebody and none more so than her mother. They had always been close; not necessarily because they were included in each other’s deepest confidences, but because they both felt that they were the same person, that they were cut from the same cloth, that a little strand of thread connected their two ribs closest to their hearts. Yet it seemed that, in her melancholy, her mother was the one person that she was farthest away from. Rona shrunk from her glances more so than from anyone else’s; rebuffed her questions more coarsely; and felt her sympathy and worry so much more sharply than with anyone else – so much so that she felt like the blight in her mind was being pierced with harsh light whenever her mother looked at her.

Thinking thusly, Rona ambled softly through the

darkening forest. The regular beating of her sneakers against the earthen floor became a sort of music. The color slowly leached out of the trees and mossy brush in a gentle progression; the orange light on the leaves dreamt slowly down into a red which soon waxed purple, until a soft grayness stole over the forest with a corresponding hush. Before long it was full dark, and the stars stole out impishly between the gaps in the canopy.

Rona didn't know for how long she wandered – she took no notice as even the sounds of the night slowly faded into nothing, as the happy bellow of fog horns and the rush of cars down the roads and animals through the brush and the hooting of the owls vanished quietly. By the time she decided to turn her roving toward the beach, the witching hour had long passed.

Hands balled in her jacket pockets, still listening to the soft brushing of her feet along the ground, the girl broke the threshold of the forest and emerged on the beach. For a moment she looked out over the water – noting the lack of distant ferries and orange-lit barges which usually glided over the obsidian waters at any time of night – and then turned to continue her walk along the shore.

She froze.

Cold steel blades of fear sliced through her so deeply

that she felt her heart would shatter with frost. She felt her insides falling out from the deepest pit of her stomach into the abyss. Her feet were no longer her own; they had become trees or salt pillars, rooted stiffly and immovably in the sand. Every thought in her mind morphed suddenly and forcibly into a single high-pitched keen, as though someone had died. Space folded and stretched around her, until the thing on the beach was the only thing she could see.

Before her she saw a giant eye, staring simply from out of pure space at the ocean. It floated gently above a driftwood log – it was colossal in size. Its roundness was grotesque and horrifyingly real, and it gleamed with an opaque wetness that was intensely repelling. Veins crisscrossed the egg white flesh with a startling redness. The gray iris and the pupil protruded from the ball, and the entire orb gave off a directed silvery blue light like a TV screen, as though it needed to light its way. It did not seem to notice her, despite the breathy wail that was now issuing from her mouth. Every few seconds the eye seemed to blink, despite having no eyelids.

Rona stood rooted on the beach for a very long time. In her mind a struggle was taking place; the struggle to decide whether what she saw in front of her was real or unreal, whether it was a truth or a lie, whether it was

benign or malignant. Her body screamed at her to run at a speed that would never be fast enough, but some quiet voice in the corner of her mind kept saying that it meant her no harm. *It is an agent of the world, it kept whispering, it lives where all the people live without it.* The way the eye gazed out over the gently rolling waters was almost pensive.

Suddenly her feet were no longer rooted; her body screamed at her to move, and so she ran. But in the split second of decision where something in your chest propels you inexorably forward at the tip of a falling pin, she ran, arms waving furiously, *toward* the eye, kicking up great strokes of sand as she went.

“Hey!” she shrieked hoarsely, “Heeey! I see you! I know you’re there! Don’t think that I don’t! Heeey!” And when it seemed to take no notice of her, she screamed, “Look at me! Look at me, you eye!”

And as she slewed to a stop next to it, it turned to look at her. Rona could almost hear a quiet *vrmm* as it turned through the air. The pupil remained staring fixedly forward, so the entire organ rotated, slowly and deliberately. Its light slid across her face, and she wondered wildly if she was about to be abducted by aliens. Finally the pupil fixed on hers, and the eye stared down at her with an almost curious indifference.

Its stare was quiet, though not cold; it seemed to contemplate her with the air of someone studying an old tool, or a photograph of someone they only barely knew. Part of its silvery iris was shot through with watery brown. The delicate fibers of the iris were patterned almost like flower petals. A silent note of benevolence sounded in its look.

As the eye gazed at Rona, Rona gazed back. Thoughts raced wildly through her head, long rectangles of colored light streaming behind her eyes at incredible speeds. The colors squirmed and fought each other and one by one all but two colors flickered out. One color was the thought that maybe the world had not lied to her after all; the other, the strong conviction that it had.

And then another thought flickered into being, like water flowing, and it was not a color at all, but a feeling – a feeling like a bubble bursting, or a fire roaring, or a wind that’s breathing. The thought was simple. The thought was that *it didn’t matter*, and the other two thoughts swirled down into nothing in its wake.

Rona reached up through the light and laid her hand gently against the eye. After a moment she drew it back, and the eye blinked, turning back toward the sea. Rona continued to stare at the hulking mass of glistening flesh. Her mind was very quiet. After a moment, she too turned

to stare out at the ocean.

She felt vaguely how infinite the blackness of the ocean was, how endless was its depth and breadth and how deep was its color. She felt it touching everything, felt the gentle hiss it made as its little waves reached up to stroke the sand. The smell of salt and brine and rot, the gentle fire, was so pleasant that it made her shiver. Out over the ocean, almost to the other shore, some faint orange lights danced and blinked. Rona felt the gentle tug of peace.

Some time passed, and eventually the eye turned again to her, blinked slowly at her in acknowledgement, and then, turning back to the water, bobbed away, floating unhurriedly out toward the dancing lights. A soft fog had since materialized, and soon in this fog the eye disappeared.

Rona turned and ran home through the forest that was her friend. All the way there her feet beat out the rhythm of a sentence which repeated endlessly in her mind, a comforting cadence which built with every beat of her shoe until it burst into a wash of golden light that made her skin feel *hers* again. She felt a cool relief when her home came into view. With a metallic, springing creak she opened the screen door and stepped into the yellow light and still air of her home. Her mother, wear-

ing a homemade flannel nightgown, sat hunched in a chair at the dining room table, forehead resting against one hand. Rona walked up to her mother, smelling the flecks of salt that trailed off her hair as she did.

She placed her hand on her mother's shoulder, and told her she was there.