

## The Day I Lost An Eye

By Barbara Adair

Dear M,

You ask me to write the story of how my body changed; how once I had two eyes, and then, in a few seconds, I only had one. You ask me to speak of this, to tell you how I felt and how I feel now; to explore my understanding of disability, shame and inadequacy. At first I look at you with my only eye and say NO! I do not want to speak of it, it is something I prefer to forget, to not know. I block out all memory of pain, all thoughts of hurt and grief for what I lost. But today, in your flat, in the summer of 2013, in New York City, you ask me again to write this story and then to read it to you. Twelve years have passed since I left the normal world and stepped into that of the aberrant, since the car accident occurred. And now, for the first time, with your prompting, your guidance and your trust I begin to write and to speak.

But before I write, I stall. I have many questions, to you and to me. How much of my memory is a fiction, something I create in order to understand my story, my loss? Do I want to make it sound poetic and beautiful, to make myself look strong and brave? Do I recreate a sanitized pathway of words, one on which there is no litter, nothing superfluous, nothing that can make me afraid for I am afraid, I am not brave? Why should I write of my fear?

Just write, you say, and so I do. I write of the shards of glass that severed my eye into two, the shadows and unfilled holes, the empty eye socket, and I write that on the left of me it is always night for on that side I am unable to see.

Who am I, I ask? I am young, I am healthy, I am well off, I am a professional, I have friends, I travel the world, and I am normal... I am a cliché of what others envy. Then, on 31 May 2002, all this changes; I am still young, healthy, a professional, well off, but I am no longer that cliché for I am disabled, I lost an eye.

It is a cold and misty morning. Marco, my friend, and I leave Johannesburg; we are going to Rorkes Drift in KwaZulu Natal, for the weekend. It is a well-known expensive lodge where David Rattray, a land owner in the area, takes paying guests up a hill to where once the indigenous people, the Zulu, camped out, where they waited to defeat the invader, the enemy who wore redcoats. But at Rorkes Drift there was no Zulu victory. The British soldiers destroyed the Zulu, cut them down and blinded them. All that was left were widows and children; no triumph, no glory, there was just sadness and loss.

We leave. We stop on the highway; the mist is thick. We drive on, the windshield wipers wipe the water from the glass, I wonder what you can see; I can see nothing. You drive slowly in this inclemency, you follow the white line in the middle of the road; the road will take us

somewhere, but it is somewhere else where we do not really want to be for it resonates with sorrow and death.

We drive, it is dark and raining, the road is slippery. A BMW, the safest German car, is traveling in the other direction. In the BMW are a family, a mother and a father, and two children. The driver swerves and skids and crashes head on into the car I am in, the car that Marco is driving.

They all die, the man and the woman and the children.

And Marco dies.

Who are you Marco, my friend? We have known each other for a long time, twenty years, but now that you are dead I think we did not know each other, we only knew what we wanted to know. 'Nothing succeeds like excess' was what you said. And there was excess. Your death was excessive and because of it I will never know you.

The mind is like a camera, a psychiatrist once told me, what happens, what you see, is processed quickly, there must be time for the click, for the photograph to be taken, if it is not taken, there will be no indelible print of it in the mind and so there will be no memory. Then there was no time to take the photograph; there is no picture. And so I recreate this story from what I am told; my memory is that of another, you, he or she, just another who is not me.

I do not know how Marco dies. I think that he is crushed to death, that the steel of the car collapsed and crushed his body; enveloped it in a steel shroud. I think my leg is crushed in the same way, the steel bent over, bent over Marco and kills him, and then it bent over me and it did not kill me, it only crushed my leg. I can also only imagine that the glass windscreen shatters and a sliver, a shard, cut across my left eye, cut it in two, split it in half. And so I have no eye, my eye is two, two dimensions, there is no third eye I can shield behind; there is only one eye, a pirate eye.

The cars are alone on the road, but behind us, a distance away is a woman. She drives closer. She stops her car, she gets out, she is afraid on this lonely road, but how can she drive on and leave us there to die? But there is only one person that is alive, me, the new I, the I that I do not want to be. She goes back to her car and takes out a sleeping bag; she covers me in feathers to keep me warm. Then she calls the police, an ambulance, someone to keep her from being alone, alone with the dead and a corpse that lives and is covered in blood.

The police and an ambulance arrive; 'who are you with?' they say.

'I am alone' I reply.

They take me to a hospital in Bethlehem. Bethlehem, the town where Christ was born, and in this town where there was once a birth, the birth of a savior, a revolutionary, there is death, the death of Marco, and the death of what was me.

In Johannesburg someone notifies my mother, she is alone at home; my father, who drinks, is out with the boys in a bar where men sit around the counter and count their money; count how much they have achieved. She walks up to my father who is drunk. She says 'B has been in a car accident, you must come with me.' My father is no longer drunk.

My father says 'It looks as if she will not make it.'

I wake up; I hear a voice: 'Does she know that she only has one eye?' A small Cessna plane arrives. I am carried out on a stretcher and put in the plane. In Johannesburg the plane lands somewhere, I am taken to a private hospital, wheeled way.

'Will I be fixed?' I ask the doctor. 'Will I look the same again; will I be the same again?' He does not reply.

I know now that we live in a retinal world. Sight is the most valuable of our senses for sight is the one sense that allows for distance. I know that I do not have to touch, to smell or to taste you; I do not need to get close to you for I can see you from afar. And I know I want to remain far away, outside the circle of your smell; it is dangerous to get too close to you as you might leave me forever, you might die. So I know sight is valuable, more valuable than anything, and I am afraid because now I have to come close to you, touch you, hear you, I can no longer just look at you from far away for now I have to look very closely for I can no longer see as I did.

Now I do not have very good peripheral vision on the right side, and I have no peripheral vision on the left side for there is no eye, turn right and then turn left; unlearn for the left as it is not there; right, ah, there it is. I often lie about this, not as malicious deception, but as I feel shame, I am not the same as you are; I am disabled. Once I was with a friend. She put her bag on the chair next to me, to my left and went to fetch or order our drinks. Then she looked for her bag. It was not there. Someone had stolen it.

'But how did you not notice, the chair is right next to you.'

'The chair is on my left, I cannot see to the left.'

I am ashamed.

I always look directly at the person to whom I am speaking; I look straight at them. I do not talk to two people at once without turning my head to look at each of them separately; I turn my whole head so that I look directly at them. I do not look by turning my eye. I look at you. I give you my full attention.

I hide behind my sincerity.

I wear glasses. I wear them when I do not need to wear them. I wear them when I am close to another, around a dinner table, standing in a supermarket queue, walking down the road. I do

not need to wear glasses, my vision is clear, but I wear my glasses as a mask, to hide my scars, my fraud, I wear them as I wear clothes, to hide my nakedness. And yet when I am alone I do not wear these glasses; there is no need for a mask when you are alone as only you can see you.

I am in disguise.

I have two-dimensional vision; everything is flat. As I lift my head and look outside I see the trees and the rocks and the road, it is all flat, there is no depth. The golden tawny eagle in the sky flies as if in a photograph. A photograph is a lonely place, no one is alive in a picture, there is no smell, people do not breathe, I cannot touch them.

I feel alone.

I do not use the word 'see.' It is a superstition, it is ominous, my thoughts remain clear, always be vigilant, always remember, you only have one eye, take nothing for granted. Every time I need to use the word 'see' I think of another word, some word to replace it, so I am always aware of my loss. I am conscious of this word and not using it. I am conscious I will never see as you do.

I live a narrative of ever vigilance.

And now, dear M, I have nothing more to say. This is my story.

What do I feel and think about the loss of a part of me, this shame? I do not know. I only know I have told this to you. Thank you for allowing me to write this story and for listening to it for now I can see you more clearly. I want to lean over and touch you, I want to smell you and hear you. I have never been able to do this. Thank you.

Love

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**Barbara Adair is a writer who has published novels and short stories, travel articles, book reviews and academic articles. She writes and works part time at the University of the Witwatersrand Writing Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, and in Lamu, Kenya, teaching and assisting students in critical thinking. Novels include *In Tangier We Killed the Blue Parrot* (Jacana, 2005), short-listed for the Sunday Times Fiction award. *END*, (Jacana, 2009), short-listed for the African Regional Commonwealth Prize, 2010. *WILL, the Passenger Delaying Flight* (Modjaji Publishers, 2020), long-listed the Sunday Times Fiction award, 2021.**

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