SEEING WITH THE HEART

by

Robert Gardner

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*From “La Petit Prince” by Antoine de Saint-Exupery:*

*"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."*

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Her voice was warm and soft. “Tell me about silver. The color. I want to know about silver.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling a little.

She sat with me at my kitchen table, just around the corner from me, our knees sometimes bumping. Close enough to touch, I thought. Close enough to take her hand and hold it, but I thought it best not to try. Just be content she was there, I told myself.

“Silver,” I said, “is shining, like light bouncing off a mirror. Silver is like light dancing.”

“Really?”

Though unable to see them, I gazed down at my hands on the table. “I think of silver when I hear you laughing. Silver is like when you chuckle, when you giggle.”

After a long pause she said, “You remember silver?”

“Yes.” I’d been told her eyes were hazel. Probably beautiful, I thought, but as unseeing as my own.

“It’s different for you,” she said. “You could see once, and I’ve never seen.”

“Well, yeah, it’s got to be different.” I wondered where this was going, this trying to explain colors to her. To someone who’d never seen colors. I smiled to myself once more. I really didn’t care. The important thing was she was here in my apartment again, she sitting at my table again.

“What about green?” she asked, her tone enthusiastic.

“Green is the color of trees budding in the spring, the color of grass waving in a meadow.”

“That sounds very pretty.”

“Green is you when you’re not saying much, but you’re happy. Or when you’re just sitting there and you’re smiling. When you feel safe with things around you, with the people around you.” I hesitated, then said, “I think the way you feel right now is probably green.”

“I see,” she said quietly.

“You know what the color blue is?”

“No.”

“Blue is the color of the sky, the color of an ocean, of a lake with sailboats gliding across it.”

“That sounds beautiful,” she said, her voice full of wonder. “The sailboats on a lake thing.”

“Do you know what a sailboat on a lake looks like?”

Her laughter bubbled up. “No, not really,” she confessed, laughing again.

I smiled. “Do you even know what a sailboat looks like?”

“No.”

“Can you picture one in your mind?”

“How could I?” she said. “I’ve never seen one.”

I remained silent, mulling over our differences. The differences in our lives, the differences in our blindness. I asked, “You don’t picture things in your head?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sounding confused. “Sort of. I don’t know. Probably not like you. I was born blind.”

I said nothing.

“You can remember all that stuff? Sailboats and lakes and colors and all that?”

“Yes.”

“It’s different for me,” she said, her voice flat.

I lowered my head. “Am I wasting your time? With all this talk about colors?”

“No, keep going,” she said, her tone now eager and bright. “This is fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Keep going. This is fun.”

“What was I talking about?” I asked, momentarily at a loss.

“You were talking about blue.”

“Okay.” After a moment I went on, my tone serious. “I guess I’m talking about colors the way I think about them. Or how I remember them. Then I’m trying to describe them in a way you might understand them.”

“Okay. What about yellow? Or orange?”

“Yellow and orange are fun colors. Colors that you see on happy days, colors that make you smile. Like the color of the sun on a summer day. Like the taste of an orange or a pineapple.”

“Go on,” she said, almost breathless. “Tell me more.”

“Yellow and orange are like when we’re talking. Like right now when you sit here at the table and we just talk.” Although she couldn’t see me, I smiled at her. “These are happy times for me. Here at the table with you. Orange and yellow times.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Then she asked, “Have you got anything to drink?”

“Sure. What would you like?” I stood up. I’ve got diet Pepsi. I’ve got some beers, and I could make coffee.”

“A beer would be great.”

I brought back two bottles of Dos Equis and a can of mixed nuts, then resettled into my spot. We sipped our beers, our hands occasionally brushing as we both dipped into the can of nuts. The mood became relaxed once more, and she started giggling. I smiled at the sound of her, at her laughter. “What’s so funny?” I asked, almost giggling myself.

“You,” she teased.

“Thanks,” I teased back, chuckling. I reached for more nuts. “So, what’s going on tomorrow?” I asked, referring to our classes at the training center.

“Nothing special.” She giggled again. “Just the usual.”

“Want to go out and get something to eat tomorrow night?”

“Maybe.”

I smiled, and I was sure she was smiling too. Her maybes almost always turned into yeses. I thought about telling her that, then decided it best if I didn’t.

And I thought about how much I’d changed, how different I was. Since being at the training center, that is. Now I was a guy with travel skills, the confidence to get out on my own. To walk around the city or take the buses. The confidence to go to a restaurant or a bar, the confidence to ask someone to go with me. Not just to ask another student so I’d have company, but to ask someone special. Someone like her.

We talked more, sipping our beers, nibbling on the nuts. I felt at ease, and she seemed at ease also. We laughed and teased and joked, enjoying each other. I pictured her there: slender, petite, her hair brown and short. Tidbits I’d picked up being around her for the last several months at the center. Things I’d been told by those who had some sight.

Finally I asked, “How about red? Do you know the color red?”

“Not really,” she said, giggling a little.

“Red can be like how spicy foods taste. You know, like when you eat peppers. Red can be how you feel in the summer when you’re out in the heat. Or maybe red can be like when you’re excited.”

“I think I understand.”

My voice became soft and serious. “Red can be like when you’re around someone you love.”

She said nothing.

Then with most of a beer in me for courage, I decided I had to tell her. What I’d been wanting to tell her. “Red is how I feel when I think about you. When I think about how I feel about you.”

I waited for a response from her, hopefully something similar, but got nothing. “Do you know what I mean?” I finally asked.

She continued to sit there, silent. When she at last spoke, her voice was almost a whisper. “Red is maybe not a good color for you.”

I sat there, my head down, and said nothing.

“Do you know what *I* mean?”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, still looking down, “but that’s the way I feel. About you.”

Both of us were quiet. She took a drink from her bottle, and I did the same. I felt as though she was staring at me, or what passed for staring for us. She took another sip, laid down her bottle, then said softly, “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we should just keep it that way. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, my voice barely audible.

“We haven’t known each other that long.”

“Two months,” I murmured. “I started at the school two months ago.”

“I remember the day you started,” she said, a smile in her voice.

I was surprised at that. At the fact she’d noticed me that day, that she still remembered the day. For me that first day at the center was a haze of too many new things being thrown at me, she lost among the dozen other students already there.

“I’m not sure I remember you on that day,” I said, my voice low.

“I remember *you.*”

The silence between us stretched out. I found myself playing with my empty beer bottle on the table, not sure what to say next, not sure what to do next. Then she asked, “Are you going to have another beer?”

“I could. Do you want one?”

“Sure.”

I brought back two more Dos Equis from the fridge. She took what seemed like a large swig from hers, then asked, “We can be friends, can’t we?”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

She took a smaller sip. “I can come up here to your apartment, and you can come down to mine. And we’ll see each other every day at the school.”

“Yeah.”

“We can even go out at night sometimes and get something to eat. Like we’ve been doing.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice leaden.

She drank more beer. After several swallows she said, her tone impish, “Let’s talk colors again.”

“Okay.” I took a long draw from my own bottle, telling myself to pull myself out of my funk and get with it.

She said, “Blue was about sailboats, right?”

“About sailboats on a blue lake.”

“But people talk about being blue. That means they’re sad or depressed or something if they say that, right?”

“Yes.”

“Does that make any sense? If someone is sad, why do they talk about the color blue? Why not some other color?”

I smiled at her question. “I really don’t know.”

She took a long drink of her beer. “Do you sometimes feel blue?”

“Yes,” I said, lowering my head once more. I remembered yesterday at the training center. I was struggling through my Braille class, then heard her laughing down the hall, she apparently in her computer class. An ache flashed through my chest at the thought she was with someone else, with other people, and she was laughing happily. She was laughing, without me. And I had immediately dived into blue.

“What about black?” she asked. “It’s bad, right? If people say something is black, that’s bad, right?”

“Not necessarily. Some things are just black in color. Like a shirt or a pair of pants, and that doesn’t make them bad.”

“Okay.”

“You can say the night is black, which means there’s no stars or moon out, but that doesn’t necessarily make it bad. If I turn off the lights, it would be black in here, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“You have the lights on?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling like I was apologizing and not sure why. “I grew up sighted, so I guess it feels normal to me to have the lights on at night.”

“Huh,” she grunted. She took a drink from her bottle, then said, “But people can say it’s a black day or something like that and that’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

She clapped her beer bottle down on the table. “All gone.”

“Want another one?”

“No.” Her chair scraped on the floor. “I better get going.”

“You have to go?”

“Yeah. I better get back to my own apartment. Thanks for the beer.” She got up and headed toward the door.

“Did any of that help?” I asked, aiming my voice at what I hoped was her retreating figure. I angled out of my chair and rose to follow her. “You know, to understand colors.”

“I need to think about it,” she threw back over her shoulder.

“Okay.”

She retrieved her long white cane, it standing in the corner next to mine in the entryway. She didn’t open the door, but instead turned around to face me. “I’m not sure I get it,” she said. “Colors are hard to understand.”

“Yeah.” I lowered my head to gaze down at her, like a sighted person would, aware only inches separated us. So close, so near, I thought. The redness, the yearning for her, flashed through me. I jammed my hands into the pockets of my jeans to keep from reaching out and touching her.

She was silent for a beat. When she spoke, her voice soft, I could tell she was looking up at me. “We’re still friends, aren’t we?”

“Yeah.”

She was silent again, this time a little longer. Then she said, “I’ll graduate before you, but we’re going to be at the center together for at least another six months.”

“Yeah?”

“So,” she said, a smile obvious in her tone, “who knows what could happen?”

I said nothing.

She brushed my arm with her fingertips. “Good night,” she said, her voice like silk. “See you at school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I heard her open the door, then the click of the latch as she gently closed it behind her. I sighed, that ache in my chest returning.

I turned and shuffled back into the emptiness of my apartment, my head still down, my hands still in my pockets. I sighed again, this time longer and deeper. Once more, she was gone. Once more, I wasn’t with her.