

Cyclops

His mother had a glass eye. Sometimes he'd see it soaking in a jar full of blue solution on the back of the toilet.

They had to take her eye, the real one, because of cancer. The hole that was left sort of looked like the mouth of a starfish he'd seen at the Aquarium.

There was always a danger of the hole getting "an infection". She told him this, close up to his face, the glass eye staring straight and hard at him so he'd remember never to touch it.

To clean it, she'd hold the eye with her special rubber-tipped tweezers and then polish it with a piece of sterile gauze. She'd set it on a cloth on the back of the toilet to dry and then wash her hands over and over, almost until they were raw. Only then would she pick up the eye with her fingers and work it into the hole, fixing her upper and lower lids around it, pulling out any lashes that got stuck.

She learned not to put the jar on the edge of the sink because of the Terrible Morning. It had fallen and shattered, and the eye had gone down the drain. She couldn't pull it out, the tweezers were too short and the tongs she had in the kitchen were too big. She tried chopsticks but they were the cheap ones that came with takeout and they broke.

"Damn!" she'd said. The boy was invested in her getting it, echoing her frustration and saying "Damn!" too, without thinking. But the bad word didn't earn him the usual spanking. She was too busy trying to get the eye out of the drain.

Finally, she decided to call Hank, the landlord.

Hank was her special friend who needed to talk to her alone sometimes. So, the boy would sit on the fire escape and eat a whole box of Cracker Jacks, but slowly, so he could make it last, saving the prize for his mother.

On that Terrible Morning, she practiced her happy voice before calling Hank. She cleared her throat over and over. She didn't dial the number until she had her voice right.

The boy never considered his mother might feel bad about having a glass eye. The glass eye was, in his opinion, sort of interesting.

One time he'd heard the neighbours talking below. They were sitting out on lawn chairs in front of the building during a heat wave. She'd left him to run to the corner store to buy them both popsicles. Watching her enter the building, his face pressed to the window screen he heard one say, "Did you hear? Landlord's doing that one."

"The cyclops?"

"Yeah."

The boy didn't know what that meant. When he'd asked her, his mother told him to ignore the nasty people. "They're just gossips with nothing better to do."

She dug around in her dresser to find the eye patch. She only used it when she was cleaning her eye in case someone came to the door. Hank was coming.

She couldn't find the patch because the boy had gotten it dirty playing pirates and had thrown it in the garbage and then forgot to tell her. So frantically was she searching for it, that she didn't hear the knock, or hear her son opening the door for Hank.

She yelled from the bedroom, in her practiced singsong voice, "Hank, sorry to bother you! Like I said, it's the drain in the bathroom. Something's stuck. Just so you know, it's my..."

But the boy couldn't hear what she said, and neither could Hank. He'd gone straight to the bathroom, yelling, "No bother, Darling, I'll just get right to it."

He had the wrench around the pipe while talking over his shoulder to the boy, "Oh well, you've got a right mess in there; hair, bobby pins, and what looks like a marble.

"Son, did you drop your marble down the drain?" Hank poked him in the belly.

In Hank's rubber glove, he held a nest of sludgy hair, his thumb smoothing it away from what looked like a marble. And then he and the boy saw, through the matted hair, her glass eye, staring hard, unblinking, angry.

Hank gasped.

When he looked up at the boy's mother, he coughed as if trying to give himself time to come up with something to say other than what he was thinking. He gave up and just set the glass eye on the edge of the sink and picked up his toolbox, looking at the floor, mumbling, "Well, I guess I better go unless there's something else you need, Margaret."

The boy and his mother and even Hank could hear how strange "Margaret" sounded. The usual "darling" hung in the air in its absence. Nobody in the boy's world called her "Margaret". She was only ever "mom" or "darling". There was no one but him and Hank to call her anything.

She stood very straight and said, "No. Thank you, Mr. Barns."

She wasn't even trying to hide the hole now. Her chin, though wobbling a bit, was pointing up. She had her arms folded over her chest the way she did sometimes when the boy was in trouble.

And Hank was in trouble. He didn't dare look her in the eye. He let himself out, very quietly.

She pulled the boy out of the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

He sat there, on the floor, next to the bathroom door, feeling sorry. Sorry she'd not been able to hide the hole from Hank. Sorry that he wrecked her eye patch. Sorry that, now, maybe forever, everything would be ruined and all because of him.

The boy looked under the door and could see her feet were pointing in the direction of the sink. He knew she wasn't using the toilet. She was sitting on the tub. But she didn't come out or answer when he called her.

Then he heard her crying, and it wasn't like when she cried in the bedroom with her face in a pillow or when she was in the kitchen and had been "chopping onions" This crying had an echo. Like she was far away.

He stayed sitting on the floor for the longest time, waiting for her to stop crying. Maybe hours, he got tired and fell asleep right there on the floor as close to door as he physically could manage to be.

In his dream he was at the aquarium standing in front of a big tank peering into the darkness of the water, trying to see something that looked like an octopus. It had inky black tendrils. When it turned suddenly, he was shocked to see it had one cold eye looking right at him as it swam towards the glass. It was wearing his mother's high heels. In the dream he fell backwards and screamed and screamed until he woke up, still screaming.

"It's alright," she said.

Her real brown eye, red and swollen crinkled around the edge as she smiled. Her glass eye stared hard not smiling at all.

"Come on, I'll make you some grilled cheese."

She let him have all the ketchup he wanted and that meant she wasn't mad at him.

After that day, she was always careful to never drop her glass eye down the sink. She kept the drains clean and got a book on how to fix things herself. "So, we don't have to bother Hank."

She bought herself a new eye patch, a pink satin one with little jewels around the edges. And for Halloween she got him a pirate patch that came with a hat and a plastic cutlass. "To practice chopping up monsters! Arrrrr!" and they made the pirate sound together, laughing.

Even if she was a cyclops, she was his mom.