

EXAMINATION

by Eric Boyd

I've always hated my face. It's handsome enough, but ordinary. My eyes are decent and my eyebrows are thick. My chin is somewhere between strong and average, and my bone structure has some of the Native Indian in me. The overall effect is all right; an all right face that's probably very easily dismissed. I've kept my hair wild and my mustache thin, but none of it seems like enough. I wanted to be my own disguise. It wasn't about looks, vanity. It wasn't about that.

For a long time I wished someone would break my nose, but nobody has ever had the guts or, more likely the time, to do it. After a while I settled on getting eye glasses. The two things weren't alike at all, and I didn't really need glasses, but they were a less painful option. I liked that better.

I had the idea while I was in the county jail. Lawyers and appeals hadn't been helping. Everyone, judge included, thought my charges were bullshit, but red tape was proving hard to cut. In the meantime, I would get jail glasses; I wouldn't be me; I'd be some other person. The glasses were under twenty dollars, and then the eye exam, which cost more. That was about twenty-five dollars. I didn't know how to manage with the exam because my vision was too good for glasses. Perfect vision. Better than 20/20; I was better than perfect. I'd have to fake my way through the eye exam.

I called my girl, Lucy, to let her know what I was planning. She was giving me ten dollars a week, but I would need more now. She asked why I needed so much.

"Well this isn't for food," I said.

"What's it for?" Lucy asked, seeming confused.

"Tobacco and a watchmaking kit."

Lucy didn't laugh, but I could tell, even from over the phone, that she was smiling.

"Quit being a jackass, what is it really for?"

"Glasses."

"Glasses?"

"Glasses."

"Do you need glasses?"

"Well, my eyes get a little fuzzy when I read for too long," I said. "Or when I'm on the computer."

"You're only ever on a computer once a week for that writing class."

"I know, but my eyes do get fuzzy..."

"But don't you have reading glasses that the church gave you?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah, the one preacher, Father Mother, gave me a pair for helping him lift some boxes while I was working last week, but those broke. They broke after five minutes; one kid on the block asked me to look over an essay he had to write for his GED class, so I pull out my great reading glasses to look professional, they bust. The kid laughed. I told him to get out of my cell, the bastard."

"Father Mother? Why do you call him that?"

"I don't— everyone just does. He's a Biker For Christ or something, but he's a bad mother, so he's Father Mother. Don't ask me, I just, I don't know..."

Lucy laughed, and it felt good to hear it.

"All right. How much are the glasses?"

"I think forty should do it. I don't need food this, I don't think. Don't worry."

"Okay, I'll try to have that in tonight. Don't do anything silly in there!"

"I was born silly," I said in a funny voice.

Lucy laughed again and said she loved me and I said I loved her. I asked how my cat was. We discussed the weather, which I actually liked discussing. She said how I didn't belong there, and I agreed, but there wasn't anything to do about it. We both agreed that I took

a very bad plea deal. And we went on like that until the phone cut us off. The time on the phone always ran out so quickly. A call cost almost five dollars and only lasted fifteen minutes. Lucy put fifty dollars onto my commissary funds that night. I filled out a pink sick-slip asking to see the eye doctor and dropped it in the box for the clinic. I went back to my cell, wrote a letter, and eventually fell asleep, pleased.

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Weeks passed. I should have known how long it would take to get a response. I had been legitimately ill before and never got anything back from the clinic. One inmate was told he'd need chemotherapy within two weeks or he'd be too far gone to have a shot. He was released to a hospital seven weeks later. I just wanted glasses. I had no chance. The fifty dollars was making me go crazy, the temptation of blowing it all on potato chips and Tang becoming greater each day. I was losing weight and I was going mad and I had so many unanswered questions, prayers. Glasses would help. Tang would help. Debit phone calls and letters and masturbation would help. Nothing helped. Why couldn't the clinic help? Eye glasses didn't seem like such a big thing to ask for.

A month went by and I was finally called for my appointment. I left my cellblock, waited in the sally port for a bit, and told an officer in the hallway where I was going. He ignored me, talking on the phone, apparently to his wife, and didn't respond when I said I needed the elevator. I stood in front of him, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. When he did glance up at me, his eyes looked at me like I shit. His eyes had a good point about me, I thought. I eventually gave up on trying to talk to him, and I walked down the hall toward the elevator.

"HEY!" the hall officer shouted, the phone held down to his chest.

"Yes?"

"'Yes? YES?!' Where the fuck ya goin'?"

“Up,” I said.

The officer grumbled to himself, called for the elevator with a walkie-talkie, and returned to his conversation on the telephone. When the hall officer wasn't saying anything, I could hear his wife's tinny voice through the phone, echoing down the hall.

It took about ten minutes for the elevator to come down. I didn't dare ask the hall officer to call it for me again.

I waited.

The door to the elevator opened and I walked in. There was a camera, mounted in a far corner, pointed at me. I looked at it. I hit the button for floor five, where the clinic was. Nothing happened.

'5.' Nothing.

'5.'

Nothing.

I stood there.

I heard noise all of a sudden. Static. I noticed a squawk box next to the buttons.

“Where ya goin'?” the Elevator asked, a lot of noise in-between each word. The static started breaking up. I said nothing. I have always made it a point not to speak to machines, especially when I don't know who's on the other end of them.

“Ya hear me?” It asked, annoyed.

I looked at the camera in the corner and made a ‘five’ with my hand.

“Huh?”

“Clinic, please,” I said meekly.

“Uh-huhzzzfuzzzahhh.”

The static wailed for until the elevator's door shut completely and I started going up. There were constant, mysterious bumps and farts and clicks. The pull cable sounded very strained. Almost every week there were announcements throughout the jail about the elevators being down for repair. Why couldn't they let inmates use the stairs? That made more sense. Make them walk! A sixteen story

building—all concrete—with plenty of guards to escort people around. What could be worse? But no, instead we had to ride the Death Elevator...

I reached the fifth floor and my heart hadn't exploded from panic yet. As the door opened I gave a thumbs-up! to the camera. Static started again and the door started to close. I had to squeeze out quickly to escape. I will never irritate an elevator again, I thought.

A piece of paper was taped to the wall; it had an arrow pointing to the right with the word 'CLINIC' written below. I went down the hall. It was very long and narrow, with plenty of flickering fluorescent lights. Damn them, I thought, they always lay it on so thick. I passed the infirmary. A sickly looking man with a bandaged head stared at me with his one good eye. A male nurse with a police badge took him by the arm and guided him into a room, closing a curtain behind them. A few other sicklies scurried past the infirmary window.

I stepped through a metal detector and finally into the clinic. Before I could sit down I heard noise coming from another squawk box. Then It started yelling at me, It told me to go through the metal detector. I told It I had already, but there was no response. There wasn't even any noise. I walked up the hall, through the metal detector, back down the hall, into the clinic. No noise, no nothing. The box was pleased.

I sat down. The receptionist behind the front desk nodded her head at me. I nodded back.

"You have to sign in," she said.

"What?"

"You have to sign your name in."

"Oh!" I said, standing. I always forgot to sign in.

The receptionist smiled.

"Sorry," I mumbled, writing my name on the sign-in sheet.

"It's all right."

She took the sheet and looked through a pile of multicoloured folders for my name.

The waiting area was nearly full. I was lucky to have a seat. The room smelled like meat. A few of the inmates waiting around had terrible shakes and they all sat with one another, talking about how they hoped to be seen by one doctor in particular. He always understood, always helped. He was the good doctor, they all said. When I sat, everyone looked at me. A very thin inmate smiled at me strangely.

An officer sat next to the front desk, reading a newspaper.

"Fucking niggers," he said, flipping the page. "Where are the comics, anyway?"

Everyone around me stared at the officer.

"Hey Bro," the thin inmate started to say, before the officer cut him off.

"WHAT? There a problem, you STICK FUCK?" The officer stared at the thin inmate. "Well?" he continued. "*Anybody* got a problem?" Nobody said anything. The officer finished reading his paper and asked if anyone wanted to read the comics. The thin inmate raised his hand and took the paper very quietly.

We all sat there for a long time. There was no music and nothing to read. From my seat I could peer into the dentist's room, but only at the dentist, hunched over, and the patient's feet hanging from a reclining chair.

Patient. I had been to the clinic before and a nurse told me I was a patient. I wasn't an inmate just then, but a patient who was seeing a doctor and, like anyone else, was entitled to good care. The nurse—actually a nurse's aid—seemed very happy to tell me this and, despite having mild Down syndrome, she was very nice. I thanked her for trying.

We all watched the dentist with his patient. There was nothing else to do. The two of them, the doctor and the patient, were funny. They were funny to look at. One would squirm and the other would jolt back. One would make a fist and the other would grab the arm of the chair. We watched for a while. Then the dentist jerked and the patient gave a muffled yelp. I saw something fall down to the floor with a CLICK-click-click as it bounced out of sight. The patient got up, shook the dentist's hand, and walked to the front desk.

"Mathurfockers," he said, his mouth stuffed with bloody cotton.

"Thay wone aven leat ma keah mae toof!"

The receptionist nodded, "You know you can't keep it. It's against the rules."

"Wah would I doh wif et? Eesaape?!"

"Don't forget to sign out," the receptionist added.

"Eesaape wif a TOOF?"

"Sorry."

"Wah tha fug es wong wif thas pahlace?! I HAID THAS PAHLACE!"

"Yeah yeah, we all hate it," the officer next to the desk chuckled.

"What floor're ya goin' to, boy?"

"Toe."

As the patient walked out of the clinic, another one was called into the dentist's room, but the dentist shut the door. I sat there waiting, all of us waiting, and there was nothing to do again. I started reading different medical posters on the walls. God, I thought, I hope I never get Hep. As I read, a fat inmate with big eyes nudged me. I nudged back.

"What are you here for?" he asked.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"You mean, here for being in jail, or here for the clinic?"

The fat inmate's eyes narrowed a bit. He laughed, "Clinic, clinic. You look sick, is all."

"Sick? Oh, no. Just glasses for me."

"That it?" he said, puzzled. "You looked a little sick."

“I guess I am.”

The fat inmate said he didn't want to talk anymore, so he didn't and I didn't either.

More time passed. Someone got up to use the bathroom. Something banged against the door of the dentist's room. The officer at the front desk farted. I ripped the cuticle from my pointer finger and it bled. A few people signed out—others entered and signed in—and it seemed never-ending. I almost fell asleep. Then my name was called by the receptionist; I stood and nodded. I said 'good luck' to the fat inmate, but he was looking down at the floor. He seemed nervous.

The receptionist passed my folder to the nurse with Down syndrome, who waved for me to follow her. We walked into a hallway, four or five doors on either side. The hallway stopped abruptly, blocked off with a large room divider and what might have been a vending machine; only see the backside visible. I could see people's feet shuffling from under the room divider, and I could hear them laughing on the other side. A good deal of laughing.

The nurse led me into a room filled with X-ray machines and other equipment. A poster on the door had a cartoon cat being X-rayed, a cartoon bird trapped in his belly. The poster warned that pregnant women should not enter the room. I thought a much better graphic could have been used. A technician at one of the machines looked at me; he was wearing what looked like an iron welder's mask. I tried not to pay attention.

“Your, um,” the Down syndrome nurse said with a pause. “Um, name?”

“Anderson, Fredrick.”

The nurse looked at her papers. “Fredrick Anderson?”

“Yes.”

Her eye started to twitch. Mine did that sometimes.

“Yes,” I said again. “I'm Fredrick.”

The nurse noticed me staring at her eye. I looked away. "I, um, can't help it," she said. "My eye, I mean..." "I know, that's all right. I'm here for an eye exam myself!" Her face was blank. I couldn't think of what to say. She coughed. "And my hands tremble a lot these days," I stammered. She coughed again. I coughed. The nurse seemed confused, but appeased, and grinned stupidly.

The nurse told me that I was not an inmate anymore, that while I was at the clinic I was a patient and that I was entitled to see a doctor and be treated decently, just like any other patient at any other doctor's office. I thanked her, thinking it might upset her if I said she'd already given that speech before. She probably gave that speech to every inmate/patient, every time they went to the clinic with a jammed finger or infected knife wound. It was annoying and pointless, but it was a nice enough thing to tell a person in County.

The nurse wrote something down on her chart and asked me to step on the scale in front of me. I did. She asked me how much I weighed when I had first come into the jail. I told her two hundred twenty-five or so. The nurse informed me that the scale I was weighed on at the in-take/processing area was off by at least ten pounds, so I was probably more like two *thirty-five*. The scale in the clinic, however, was right! she told me, and I was now one hundred and eighty-four pounds. Maybe less because I was wearing, um, *really heavy shoes*, she said. The entire time I kept wondering why I needed to be weighed for an eye exam at all. It seemed odd. Still, I was excited to see the eye doctor and get my glasses.

The nurse had to leave the room and told me to wait where I was, then she left the room and I waited where I was. After exchanging some quick glances with the X-ray welder, a female doctor came into the room. She was a small, stout woman. Her body was rather birdlike, and it was punctuated with a hawkish beak. Maybe I didn't want a broken nose. Her hair looked like scrambled eggs and she

stunk of iodine. She smiled at me. I tried smiling back; it barely worked.

"Fredrick, hiiiiii," she chirped with a strange accent, reading my chart. "Are you well today?"

"I'm fine."

"Great! Weelll, today you're going to be getting your last shot for the Hepatitis vaccination; you had one when you first came here, one a month after that, and now this last one, which we told you you'd get six months after the second shot, if you recall."

I did not.

"And actualyyyy," the doctor continued, "it's been six months and almost a week now, so we needed to hurryhurry and get you in today!"

I felt ill. Good thing I was in the clinic.

"Soo," she grinned, "go ahead and roolll up your shelve..."

As I signed my name out and began to leave, I noticed an inmate/patient sitting and waiting in the seat I had sat and waited in. He was reading the Hepatitis poster on the wall. Walking out of the clinic, I rubbed my arm. It hurt.

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After breakfast, I usually went back to sleep until lunch. We had runny oatmeal and hardboiled eggs. Nobody had any pepper for either. The yolks on the eggs were gray. I went back to my cell, 207.

It had been three weeks since my trip to the clinic. I shut the door of my cell and watched all of the morning workers huddle into the sally port. I watch them waiting to go out into the hallway, have elevators called for them, and start working. They looked like lightning bugs in a glass jar, bouncing around in their orange uniforms and their green uniforms. I used to work. I wore green. I didn't miss it. My cellmate made a terrible moaning sound as he turned over to face me.

"Anything good this morning?"

"No, John."

"Yes, yes, and I don't just mean the food!"

John tried to laugh, started to turn back toward the wall, and bashed his fist against his bunk. He moaned terribly again. He said something about his back and settled after a bit.

"You know, I got my sister on the phone last night," John said, to the wall.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. She might might *might* be able to send me my tarot deck."

"That'd be good. That might help ya out."

"Hey, you too, buddy. I know you meditate, Fredrick, so don't doubt the Tarot."

"Okay."

John was fifty-six years old. He was a writer, which was why I took him into my cell. He was nice enough. John kept on about his card deck until he fell back asleep. I stared out of the window for a while longer, pissed in the sink, since that was quieter, took off my shirt, hopped up onto my bunk, covered up, and closed my eyes.

I was hitching a ride with an Ice cream man I wanted to go home; this was very important to me. I was staring at a photograph of Lucy that was in my wallet. The Ice cream man seemed upset, seeing me with the wallet, so I told him I'd buy some ice cream as thanks for the ride. I asked him to pull over, because I only had a twenty dollar bill and I'd need to get change. He stopped the truck at a convenience store. I guess I bought something and broke the twenty. But the Ice cream man abandoned me! Then I bought a slushie. Fuck that Ice cream man. The only way home, now, was to cross a crumbling bridge. There were construction workers trying to repair the bridge, but all that was there was a rusty steel beam. I finished my slushie, got down on my hands and knees, and started to crawl. A worker was helping guide me, but halfway across the bridge, he fell!, grabbing at my leg. The construction worker turned into a cat,

whose tail was tied to the tail of my cat. They began to fight, hanging from my foot. I rushed across the bridge, scared that the cats might fall into the river below us. I got to the other side and separated the cats. The construction worker turned back into a construction worker, thanked me, and left. For some reason, I couldn't have crossed the bridge myself—I wanted a guide but I couldn't have one— and only by saving the cats was I all right. Me and the cat were about to go home. We began walking. I think that I was about to..

“ANDERSON,” the squawk box in my cell hissed. “Anderson, wake up.”

“Huh? Yeah?”

“Clinic, Anderson. Get up and go...”

Riding on the elevator, I wondered how my dream was going to end. That's a dumb thing to wonder. Dreams, I had once read, are supposed to only be remembered when they're going to end anyway— you can't cut off a dream in the middle— it ends when it ends. Dreams start and end and can't be interrupted in-between. Bits of trivia like that drove me batshit sometimes.

I reached the fifth floor. The elevator stopped and I got out. Then the metal detector. The front desk, sign-in sheet. The officer was reading his paper. The door to the dentist's office was closed. Someone was wheeled in and dropped off for stitches, bloody and strapped to a wheelchair. Everybody was silent. Nobody spoke to me. My name was called quickly and I was informed that I was a patient again. The Down syndrome nurse was wearing scrubs with ice cream cones printed on them. I was escorted to a different room from the last time, one without welder's masks, and I wasn't put on a scale to be weighed.

The eye doctor entered. He was very pale, but robust. He looked like he lived a way that was very quiet but very peaceful. We didn't say

much to each other. I liked that. He smelled like cigars. I hadn't smoked a cigar in months. First we did the exam, which I faked my way through, but not because my vision was perfect. The smaller letters were blurry, but the chart the eye doctor had me read the same, every line, every time.

E V C D T P O
EVCDTPO
evcdtpo

My eyes had nothing to do with it. By the sixth or seventh time reading, I had memorized the chart. Worried, however, that I might need glasses after all, I pretended to not know some of the letters. I 'guessed' a lot of them:

"E, um... V orr, shit. Oh! Pardon my french... U? That a U? Then C, O? T P. And maybe Q?"

"A little nearsighted," the doctor said. "Pretty common."
He put something in my eyes.
"Burns," I said, daubing my eyes with a paper towel. "Shit!"
"Mhmm."

I was asked to pick which frames I wanted for my glasses, but there was no mirror for me to try them on. The doctor apologized for this. I said it was okay. I picked the black frames. They were simple and I was sure they'd look fine, I said. The doctor wrote on a piece of paper and stuck it to my original pink request slip to go to the clinic. It had been over two months since I wrote that slip. The doctor told me it'd be a week more for the glasses, and asked if I wanted scratch protection for the lenses. And a hard case. They always get you with the extras, the add-ons.

Three weeks later I received my glasses. I put them on as soon as I opened the box and someone walking by shouted 'Hey! It's Clark

Kent!' I hadn't seen myself in the glasses yet, but already I was Superman. I smiled, but then I thought to myself: No.

I didn't even need eye glasses. Not really. Wearing them wouldn't change my face. I felt my nose and it still wasn't broken. When I put the glasses on, I saw how weak the prescription was. It was enough, though. I could see differently; things looked a little different.

I got the package just after breakfast, so it was too early to turn the light on in my cell. I didn't want to bug John, my cellmate; he had enough trouble with his back to deal with me. The squawk box in my cell made some noise, but nobody said anything on the other end. I watched the morning workers. A lot of them were getting yelled at for not waking up. After everybody was back in their cells and there was nothing left to look at, I put my glasses in their case (\$6), and went back to bed...

I dreamed that I was in my old apartment, in the bathroom. My cat was sleeping next to the bathtub. I was looking at my reflection in the tub and I was naked. Lucy was also in the reflection, but when I turned around to see her, she wasn't there. I looked at the reflection again, and I was dressed, my glasses were on. Maybe it wasn't my reflection, actually. I think it was. If so, my face looked very handsome. I looked like somebody else. I left the bathroom and went into my writing room because I smelled something. The desk drawer was open, filled with half-smoked cigars. A lot of them were still smoldering, crackling and glowing; they were all punched out, the way they might be in a cartoon. They were very beautiful. I looked at the cigars for a long time. They looked like black daisies.

