

ALL I SEE IS GRAY

Written by

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INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

Through an ophthalmoscope we see nothing but an eyeball. It stares ahead wide open, almost life-less, until it blinks. A DOCTOR puts the tool down and flips through pages of paperwork in a manila folder.

ROBYN (50s), sits on an examination chair and stares ahead blankly at a vision chart that is peeling off the wall. All he can hear is a pair of dull heels tapping against the tile floor.

The heels belong to ANITA (50s), a small yet fierce woman. On one side of her sits a pair of old, worn-out athletic shoes. On the other side is a pair of military boots.

The sneakers belong to her son JOSEPH (24) who is slouched over in his seat, privately sketching something in a notebook while listening to music through his headphones.

DANIEL (28) is seated with perfect posture, dressed from head to toe in his army reserves uniform. He adjusts his uniform, as his mother fidgets nervously.

DOCTOR

We've done a full examination and found normal retinal thickness in both eyes.

Anita rifles through her pocket book to find a pen and paper to take notes. She only manages to scribble down a few words.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

The MRI of the brain showed his optic nerves were also normal. The posterior segment examination showed a healthy disc and normal macula.

DANIEL

What does that mean? Normal macula?

DOCTOR

In simple terms, his eyes are perfectly fine.

ANITA

Then what's wrong with him?

Robyn stares at a vision chart as if he is in a trance.

DOCTOR

We suspect Robyn might have developed some type of conversion disorder.

ANITA

What?

DOCTOR

It's a functional neurological symptom disorder that causes psychological stress to manifest as physical symptoms. Though very rare, it is plausible considering his history of PTSD.

JOSEPH

So it's not real?

DOCTOR

It's very much real. Based on our examination, your father is experiencing total vision loss.

ANITA

So what, can we get him Lasik or is there a surgery?

DOCTOR

Again, since there's nothing wrong with his eyes, surgery would be useless-- we don't get a lot of cases like this, but I would recommend taking him to a psychiatric specialist.

The doctor looks the family up and down with judgement.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

But I'm going to be honest, this is not always the most affordable option for... families like yours.

Anita shoots the doctor a defensive scowl. The doctor backpedals.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Military families. The VA usually has loopholes about such specialized care.

Anita looks at Robyn mournfully as he sits on the chair. He fidgets with his dog tags that are tied around his neck.

EXT. ROBYN'S HOUSE - EVENING

A car parks in the driveway. Anita gets out of the driver's seat and walks over to the passenger door. Joseph gets out and slams his door, with no regard for Robyn.

Anita reaches over to unbuckle Robyn's seatbelt but he grunts and swats her away. He unclicks the buckle himself.

Daniel and Anita take Robyn's arms as he tries to resist their guidance. Joseph has already beat them inside.

ANITA
Careful there's a step.

ROBYN
I know, I built it.

Robyn rips his arm away like an ornery child as he scuffles up the steps. As the door slams behind Robyn, Anita picks up a pile of mail the rest of her family has ignored.

She skims an envelope off the top which reads "FINAL NOTICE" and stuffs it in her jacket pocket before anyone can notice.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

On the entertainment center live a few framed photos. One photo shows Robyn in a military uniform. Another shows Robyn smiling with his family. This is a very old photo.

Robyn plants himself in his recliner, seated directly in front of a very old television. Some things never change.

Joseph sits on a couch next to Robyn. Robyn reaches for the remote, but Anita beats him to it, placing it in his hand.

Robyn turns on the TV. Anita walks into the kitchen adjoined with the living room and places the remaining pile of bills on the counter as she rifles through the fridge.

ANITA
Will you eat anything before bed?

Robyn ignores her. He stares at the TV and fumbles some buttons on the remote.

ANITA (CONT'D)
We've got some stew chicken I can take out of the freezer.

ROBYN
I hate your stew chicken.

Robyn puts on a sports game.

ANITA

I can make something else.

Robyn cranks up the volume and puts the remote on the coffee table. Joseph rolls his eyes and grabs the remote. He switches the channel and lands on a non-fiction channel.

ROBYN

Hey! Put the game back on.

JOSEPH

You're not even watching it!

ROBYN

Yes I am!

Joseph gets off the couch and walks past Robyn. He flicks his hand in front of his father's eyes, but he does not flinch.

JOSEPH

How?

ROBYN

You wanna use my TV you better start paying for some fucking cable!

Joseph turns off the TV and leaves the remote out of Robyn's reach. Robyn lunges toward the remote but falls short and loses his balance.

ROBYN (CONT'D)

(Under his breath)

Lazy piece of shit.

Joseph walks into his bedroom and slams the door behind him, as Robyn turns the TV back on.

Daniel follows his mother to the kitchen counter, and begins going through the pile of bills.

DANIEL

Jesus.

ANITA

Watch your mouth. We don't know who's up there, don't test our luck.

DANIEL

I wasn't expecting these appointments to add up so fast.

ANITA

Wait until today's bill comes in.
That MRI is not gonna be cheap.

DANIEL

Isn't the VA covering that?

ANITA

Not for specialty care. And we
can't apply for disability until we
get a diagnosis.

DANIEL

Then how are we paying for this?

ANITA

That's not for you to worry about.

Overhearing everything, Robyn swallows a lump in his throat
as he keeps his attention focused on the television.

INT. ANITA'S BEDROOM - LATER

Now dressed in her pajamas, Anita throws her clothes into a
corner of her room, which is a mess. The envelope containing
the "final notice" is peaking out of her jacket on the
ground, but she doesn't realize.

Exhausted, she climbs into bed and rolls over to turn off the
lamp by her bedside table. The empty space beside her is
noticeable.

INT. LIVING ROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

Robyn is sound asleep in his recliner chair, alone, as the
morning sun seeps through the blinds. The TV is still on.

EXT. THE FAMILY CAR - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Joseph loads a box of paintings and pottery inside the car as
Anita guides Robyn into the passenger seat. There is already
a full box of art at Robyn's feet.

Anita lingers outside the car and privately confronts Joseph.
She is dressed in professional attire with a government ID
badge. She hands Joseph an unnecessarily detailed printed-
packet of directions from google maps, with the doctors suite
highlighted.

ANITA

I can't quite figure out where the parking for Suite 106D is, so you'll need to get there early.

Joseph nods. He throws the packet in Robyn's direction.

ANITA (CONT'D)

They're doing construction on the bridge over 90, so take the back way. Remember? Joseph? It's the way we used to go to church.

Joseph nods again with a deadpan stare of irritation.

ANITA (CONT'D)

If anything happens, you can just swing by my office and I'll see if I can slip out of a meeting or two--

JOSEPH

--I can handle it Mom.

Anita doesn't look so sure. But she smiles anyway.

ANITA

Okay, just keep me updated.

She waves them goodbye as Joseph backs out of the driveway.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Robyn shuffles his feet around the box at his feet, clearly annoyed by the mess. He grabs one of the sketches and shoves it aside.

ROBYN

I told you to clean out this junk.

Joseph stops the car at the end of the driveway and faces his father. He puts the piece of art in the back seat, protectively.

JOSEPH

It's not junk, it's from school.

ROBYN

School? You call that school? I work my ass off for forty years just so you can waste all my money on fucking finger painting.

Joseph holds his tongue.

ROBYN (CONT'D)

Why don't you get off your lazy ass
and get a real job. Start earning
your keep around here. Not just
freeloading off your mother and I.

JOSEPH

Maybe I should sell my soul to
Uncle Sam like you and Daniel.

ROBYN

Your soft head wouldn't last one
day.

JOSEPH

Last time I checked you're the one
who needs the fucking shrink.

Robyn goes silent. Joseph's words cut him deeper than he
expected. Robyn opens the car door.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

ROBYN

I'm not going.

Robyn unbuckles his seatbelt and is about to climb out.

JOSEPH

Get back in the car.

ROBYN

No. No more doctors. I'm not going
to pay another white quack just to
tell me I should be able to see
when clearly I can't!

Joseph panics as his mother is still watching them from the
top of the driveway. Robyn steps one foot onto the driveway.

JOSEPH

If you step out of this car, Mom's
going to march down here and beat
both our asses.

Robyn stops. He knows Joseph is right.

ROBYN

If you take me to another doctor
I'm going to beat your ass myself.

Joseph smiles and waves "everything's fine" at Anita before
glaring back at Robyn.

JOSEPH
Okay well I have to take you
somewhere!

Robyn considers, gets back in the car, and closes the door.

CUT TO:

INT. CORNER STORE CHECK OUT COUNTER - LATER

Robyn puts a pack of sweet tea down on the check-out counter. He points to the wall of cigarettes behind the counter. He is face to face with a much younger, sloppy looking CLERK.

ROBYN
(To Clerk)
Grab me a pack.

CLERK
Which ones?

Robyn and Joseph both answer without having to think.

Salem. ROBYN

Salem. JOSEPH

The Clerk places a pack of Salem cigarettes on the counter. Robyn shows the clerk his Military ID.

ROBYN (CONT'D)
Military Discount.

CLERK
Yeah, we don't do that here.

Robyn rolls his eyes. He pulls out his wallet and inserts his card, but the transaction is declined for insufficient funds.

JOSEPH
You just put it in wrong.

Joseph takes the card from Robyn, but instead of using it, he pulls out his own credit card and taps it. The transaction is approved. He hands the card back to Robyn. Embarrassed, Robyn rips his own card back out of Joseph's hand and puts it back in his wallet.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR - A FEW MOMENTS LATER

Joseph lights a cigarette and passes it to his father. Then he lights one for himself. He turns on the radio and a familiar Reggae song fills the car with comfort.

Robyn rolls down the window as they drive down the road. Music from the radio swells. He taps his fingers to the rhythm.

Joseph puffs his cigarette and bops his head to the beat. He is a spitting image of his father.

Before they know it, they're both mumbling along to the song. Joseph glances at Robyn enjoying himself through the rear view mirror and smiles. The wind on Robyn's face is refreshing. For a moment there is nothing but joy.

EXT. ROBYN'S HOUSE - LATER

Outside their home, Anita hangs a few of Daniel's green shirts, along with his uniform coat with the name tag "Edwards" facing out.

Anita pins her jacket up to dry, but winces as she pulls her shoulder too far. Daniel takes the jacket from her.

ANITA

I got it.

She reaches back for the jacket but Daniel hangs it up on the line. He hesitates, watching his mother continue in pain.

DANIEL

Mom, I'm worried about you. The bills are too much. You can't be working and taking care of him full time.

Anita goes back to hanging up clothes, clearly in pain.

ANITA

I'm not sending him to a home.

DANIEL

That's not what I'm saying. I think we should fight the VA on this.

ANITA

They don't listen, I've tried.

DANIEL

Let me try, I've had a completely different experience with them, they've been good to me.

ANITA

Because you're useful. Wait until you're bleeding out, they won't do shit!

Anita picks up the empty laundry basket and storms off toward the house. Taken aback, Daniel stares at his mother in shock.

Daniel notices the wrinkled envelope peaking out of his mother's jacket pocket, as it is hanging on the line. He opens it, revealing a "notice of default" on their house. His face falls as he realizes.

On the clothesline his reserves uniform flaps lifelessly in the wind behind him.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

The family is seated around the table, each with a dish of stew chicken and potatoes. All the bowls are nearly empty, except for Robyn's which is left untouched.

ANITA

How did the appointment go?

Robyn fidgets with his spoon but says nothing.

ANITA (CONT'D)

Did you like Doctor Nowak?

Joseph takes a bite of his stew and shoots Robyn a look.

ANITA (CONT'D)

Is there something wrong with the stew Robyn?

ROBYN

It's cold.

ANITA

Let me heat it.

She rushes over to grab Robyn's soup. She smells a whiff of something strange and grabs Robyn's shirt to inspect it.

ANITA (CONT'D)

Why do you reek of smoke?

ROBYN

Doctor recommended a cigarette.

Robyn sneers. Anita's concern turns to a scowl.

ANITA

What?

JOSEPH

We didn't go.

ANITA

What do you mean?

JOSEPH

To the doctor. He didn't want to go.

Anita throws her hands up in frustration.

ANITA

Oh he didn't want to go? He never wants to go anywhere, but that doesn't mean I don't suck it up and take him anyway!

Joseph looks down at his bowl, ashamed.

ANITA (CONT'D)

Joseph, we cannot afford to be wasting money like this!

Robyn slides the bowl of soup away from him.

ROBYN

I'm done with this.

JOSEPH

Eat the fucking stew. There's nothing wrong with your mouth.

Seated in between Anita and Robyn, Joseph slides the bowl back in front of Robyn. Robyn's face tightens with anger.

ROBYN

I can't.

ANITA

That's a 200 dollar cancellation fee, you think we're rolling in cash all of a sudden?

DANIEL

Why don't we go for a walk and get some fresh air for a second Pop.

ROBYN

I can't walk!

JOSEPH

You CAN walk! You CAN eat, you just can't fucking see!

ROBYN

I CAN'T WALK IF I CAN'T SEE!

JOSEPH

You can't or you don't want to?

ANITA

Do not speak to your father like that!

JOSEPH

Some father he is. I quit school to pay his bills, all so he can sit around moping about how much he hates us!

ANITA

No one asked you to do that, I had everything under control!

DANIEL

Did you?

He throws the bill Anita has been hiding down on the table.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Because when were you going to tell us we're losing the house?

JOSEPH

Why do you care, you won't even be living here anyway.

DANIEL

You knew about this?

(To Anita)

Why would you tell him and not me?

ROBYN

ENOUGH!

Robyn slams his fists down on the table with an unpredictable force that sends the bowl of stew flying off, shattering in half and spilling all over the floor beside him. Signed onto the bottom of the bowl is Joseph's name.

The whole family is silent for a moment.

ANITA

What does that mean you won't be here?

Anita turns toward Daniel in shock.

DANIEL

There hasn't really been a good time to tell you. They're mobilizing me in two weeks.

ANITA

Where?

DANIEL

I don't know yet.

Unable to hold it together any longer, Anita breaks down. She sobs in Daniel's arms. Robyn is frozen. So is Joseph.

EXT. ROBYN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is quiet with the exception of noisy crickets filling the ambiance. A single light at the dinner table is lit. Robyn's back faces the window, through which he can be seen at the table alone, unmoved, like a statue.

INT. JOSEPH'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Joseph lies on his bed staring at the ceiling. Daniel knocks on the door, and opens it without waiting for a response.

He looks around at Joseph's walls, which are covered with beautiful paintings and sketches. Much of the decor has themes of anti-war. A shelf lined with hand-made pottery hangs on one wall, just like the bowls at the dinner table.

Daniel walks over to the shelf and picks up a mug. He flips it over, revealing Joseph's name signed on the bottom.

DANIEL

I'll never know where you got this from.

Daniel runs his fingers over a painting on the wall.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Definitely not Pop, remember that
time he tried to repaint the
shutters?

He sits at the foot of Joseph's bed.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
He bought the ugliest shade of
green I've ever seen.

JOSEPH
Man was blind before he was blind.

DANIEL
God, Mom was so mad.

Daniel laughs and Joseph lets out a faint smile, reflecting
on the memory fondly. But the moment fades quickly.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
You going to keep them together
while I'm gone?

JOSEPH
Mom's going to be fine.

DANIEL
I'm not talking about her. He's the
one who needs you.

JOSEPH
He thinks I'm a failure.

DANIEL
He thinks he's a failure. You two
aren't as different than you
pretend to be.

Daniel gives Joseph a comforting look.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Robyn stares at a wall ahead where a family picture hangs,
though he can't see it. Frustrated, he kicks the leg of the
table, scattering the pieces of the broken bowl, which remain
untouched.

He hesitates before reaching down to gather the pieces. He
shakily tries to fit the pieces back together, like an
unsolvable puzzle.

Joseph's bedroom door opens. He observes his father through a narrow crack, touched by his attempt to reassemble the bowl.

But Robyn can't quite figure out how to piece the bowl together properly, no matter how he tries. In frustration he slams the pieces down on the table and pushes them away. Releasing all this tension, he finally begins to sob.

Joseph then steps back into his room and returns to the dinner table. He sits across from his father and sets up a palette of water colors beginning to paint something, moving his brushstrokes with grace and ease.

He dips the brush in water, and swirls it around before changing to a new color. Robyn perks up at the sound of the water. Joseph keeps painting. It's something abstract, though maybe a portrait.

ROBYN

What are you doing?

JOSEPH

Painting. You. Don't look, it's not finished.

Robyn smiles. He slowly reaches out his hand for the paint brush. Instead he grabs Joseph's hand by accident. Joseph looks up, startled by this connection with his father.

Robyn grabs a piece of paper and places it in front of himself. He feels around for a paintbrush. Surprised, Joseph looks at his father in awe.

ROBYN

How do I start?

JOSEPH

Close your eyes and paint what you see.

ROBYN

All I see is grey.

Joseph waters down some black pigment and gives it to Robyn.

JOSEPH

Perfect. Here's grey.

Robyn hesitates. But for once he sees no reason to disagree. His hand shakes as he reaches the brush into the cup of grey.

He uses his other hand to feel the edges of the paper. He lowers the brush onto the page, dropping a few splotches, before spreading grey over the page.

Daniel and Anita observe curiously from the kitchen as they clean up dinner.

DANIEL

Make sure you get all his grey
hairs.

Robyn grunts as his lips hold back a smile. Joseph laughs and even Anita breaks a smile.

Joseph adds the final strokes to his portrait of Robyn.

FADE TO BLACK.