

MY THREE GREEN EYES

Debra Goldberg

I live with an eye on top of my head and that's it. Three green eyes total: golden flecks, large white irises, two normal and that odd fellow that either surfaced like a plump dumpling in a pot of boiling water or plopped down like a fat raindrop from the divine realm. What can I tell you? On the morning of my sixth birthday I reached up to my head to scratch an itch and there I found The Ungrateful One. I screamed for Mama and she let out a shriek as if Daddy had returned headless from the Next World. There it was nestled in my brown curls like a tiny egg.

My other eyes, dumb bureaucrats, still pretend to know nothing. Rest assured I've made a lifelong search: there is not one word about a third eye in Torah, Talmud, Commentaries, Prophets, Psalms, Kings, even the mystical Zohar. In this way God offers me a silent partnership.

Today, *taka*, is my fortieth birthday and end of my sixth month without Rifka Leah. Brooklyn isn't Paris: how long can she hide? The Almighty One, blessed be His name, formed me from rigid clay. When a Fish makes up his mind, there is no turning back. "I don't care! I don't care! I don't care about your world, Hashem!" If God understands the human heart He'll be merciful. Today at four o'clock, (I've chosen the exact moment of my birth), I will remove my skullcap in the editorial offices of the *New York Times*, lower my head and then—poof! Like giant bubbles burst all other headlines in the world.

Wait until they discover what I see with my third eye.

Rifka Leah forced the issue. She will return when she hears the news and at last comes to her senses and agrees to be my bride. When a secret is no longer a secret why hide in the shadows? She will stride through the door of my flower shop wearing her favorite purple dress with the mother-of-pearl buttons I would like (God have patience with my wanton lust) to bite off and she will demand to speak to me. She will push through the inevitable crowds that

will part like the Red Sea at the sight of her beauty, the familiar faint scent of Shalimar trailing behind her, and she will beg my forgiveness. On this matter I have faith because without faith how could I go on?

I've picked the *New York Times* for my announcement because I want to do this with dignity. I've even purchased refreshments for the *papparazzi*: several cases of Coca Cola and some Sunshine crackers. First I'll finish my cinnamon tea and then, *taka*, I'll dress in my light wool High Holiday suit even though it's a steaming August day and that's it. I've done everything possible to prepare myself for the onslaught of attention because by nature I'm a shy and studious man. The one-bedroom apartment above my flower shop won't hold many people; for seventeen years hardly any visitors. I've polished the furniture a hundred times to settle my nerves. As if I'm a dying man with one flat foot in the next world, even the toaster and plastic tablecloth on the small kitchen table seem to possess a kind of numinous, gilded glow of knowingness. Nevertheless, the prospect of world attention produces frightful images. I imagine a blimp suspended over Shmurnoff's bakery with a banner proclaiming: "Fish the Florist is a False Prophet!" Well, I never said otherwise but isn't it so that what is false seems true when you turn a thought inside out?

It came without notice. Mama's fleshy arms pressed against my face were as soft as congealed chicken fat. She dragged me in my pajamas down the backstairs in a headlock to the nearest doctor she could find, the "bachelor proctologist" who rented the first floor of our dilapidated three-decker in Brooklyn off Avenue J.

"Tumor," she shouts!

"But Mrs. Fish," the doctor said with his voice raised an octave as if he's speaking to a foreigner. "A tumor doesn't wink."

He disappeared into his medical books and emerged hours later in our kitchen sighing as if he'd climbed to heaven on Jacob's ladder and returned empty handed. His face entombed in fear, he lifted his thick hands palms upward and made a gesture of defeat. It was a terrible moment. I cried out and tried to flee but Mama caught me and covered the eye with a small saucepan. She pawed at my raised arm and knocked it down.

“Don’t touch,” she warned me.

The doctor offered me a wan smile and a pitying glance. He produced from his pants pocket a tiny book of Psalms and a shred of brown paper on which he scribbled two prayers: one for thanking God for a miracle and the other asking for His protection in times of danger. His long face bore a fake smile that convinced me I was about to be lied to or worse yet carted off to the hospital. Clumsily he wrapped the paper around a silver dollar he fished from his other pocket as if he was wrapping Chanukah *gelt*.

“Here,” he said with wet eyes. He opened my tight fingers one by one and pressed it into my hand. “Take.”

He bent down and cupped my cheek with his warm hand.

“Don’t tell no one,” he whispered.

I remember trembling all over. I heard men’s voices praying from the tiny *shul* next door. I heard Hebrew words that seemed to press against my lips like tiny bird kisses. Other words, more troubling, arrived in my head that I’m unable to explain.

Mama, meanwhile, lowered herself into a chair and started to sob uncontrollably. My father had died the previous year from unearned misery and a weak heart. The grief remained lodged in my mother’s eyes. I was all she had left—no siblings, parents and one good for nothing brother-in-law who lived in Florida.

A fearful expression entered her bewildered eyes. She pushed the bangs off my forehead. “I don’t want no sideshows,” she said.

Since that time I have covered up my third eye with a calfskin skullcap and that’s it. It’s worn thin in several places, offering peepholes. Every day I rub the skullcap with sunscreen. Until I’m blue in the face I plead with the trouble maker: “Don’t gaze in the direction of the sun.” *Mamish*, can you make one who chooses to be deaf listen? I should pour salt on him for the life he has cost me.

That some flowers bloom late is no great secret. At last someone to love. One day Rifka Leah strolls into my shop off Avenue J in Flatbush to buy herself some purple tulips, (such hopeful flowers—tulips). I see a knockout standing before me in a purple silk dress, a woman of thirty-five who looks like a girl of twenty. From her manner of dressing I guessed strictly kosher, small waist loosely cinched with a purple sash, arms covered with long sleeves, ample

hips meant for childbirth, her own shiny black hair curled softly around her neck, (no wig or head covering suggesting she was married), and plush lips I want to kiss all day long.

What happens next makes the mystery of my third eye seem like a riddle a *pisher* in kindergarten could solve. Seven times in one month the little bell on top of the door jingled and in struts Queen Esther. She returned, sometimes twice a week, on the pretext of purchasing more flowers.

“Chaim, wake up!” I said to myself. “How many weddings, funerals and Sabbath lunches can one woman attend?” It wasn’t long before I figured out she was inventing reasons to visit my shop.

You will see for yourself soon enough that I’m no matinee idol. I’m short, bone thin, with a hawkish nose and cursed with the soft plump hands and feet of a courtesan. I don’t have to tell you how unattractive this is in a man. Even so, my sweetheart lets me know (as women do) that when she gazes at me she sees a prince. I work up the nerve to ask her out, and soon, *Baruch Hashem*, we are keeping company in front of customers who have dismissed me as a loser—their suspicious eyes treating our courtship as if it’s an assault on reality. Who can fathom that God plucked for Fish a perfect rose?

Our courtship is by the Holy Book. Except in dreams, (the Evil Inclination never rests!), I didn’t lay a finger on her. Six weeks we kept company, three weekday evenings and on Sundays at the Brooklyn Botanical. All this time my third eye can hardly control itself. It begged to see her, screaming, ranting, raving all day long: “Where’s my Rifka! Where’s my Rifka!”

Who doesn’t eventually ignore what he can’t solve? All my life I kept silent about The Holy Roller who parked himself on the top of my head. I ask for silence in return but he won’t shut up, demanding instead to gaze upon my sweetheart. Almighty One, I ask a question to which there is only one answer: what young lady would want a husband with a third eye?

My darling Rifka is a smart butter cookie. I add with pride that she is a completely certified accountant. She said she wants no secrets between us. One night, she tearfully confessed she was once engaged to a young man, an optician who also fancied himself a

poet. Three days before the wedding, *lo alenu*, he abandoned her to live a bohemian lifestyle in Greenwich Village. She told me this, her eyes glistening, and then asked me if I wish to share something from my past that has hurt or embarrassed me. Right then and there I should have said yes or no. Instead I cleared my throat and ordered coffee and this, I think, was the tip off. From that moment on I was suspect: a client who possibly cooked the books.

Off and on she brought up the question. For months I refuse to answer but the air between us changed as if the weather had become uncertain. One day after a particularly good business week I took her to lunch at a fancy dairy restaurant named Taste of Paradise where is made the world's best sweet cream cheese blintzes, so good they melt your inhibitions. Maybe the ritzy atmosphere makes her think I'll produce a ring, but that afternoon she became particularly flirtatious.

"Chaim, my Prince," she whispered, "is there an important question you want to ask me but you don't because you are afraid I might say no? I won't say no."

There is a smile on her wide moist lips that leaves me breathless. She leaned a little more in my direction, careful not to touch. My passions are ignited, the aching loneliness begging to be consummated, and breathing like a bull I felt myself without permission bending my head and lifting my skullcap.

To my horror, I heard a shriek—an inhuman sound you can't imagine. Then a chair leg scraped against the wooden floor, the dishes came crashing off the table, and off she goes—running in her purple pumps down Avenue J as if the Cannanites have resurfaced from the manholes.

"Well," I tell God through clenched teeth, "I've had enough." No more hiding. I will expose the world to the eye and the eye to the world. I will tell the world how my third eye sees it: what hidden dreams, joys, sins, desires, good deeds, sorrows grow beneath the surface. Aching for reunion, it's lost patience.

"People of the world," I will tell them, "listen to what I have to say! You have exhausted The King of the Universe, the Almighty One, with your demands for redemption. Here is what I know with certainty; perhaps the rantings of a lunatic but perhaps not. The

Sages teach us that a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy and what am I or what is any man for that matter but a waking dream of flesh and blood?

“Into a billion pieces, out of anguish, The Almighty One has fractured the unborn human Messiah. Here he is, assembly required!” A fingertip here and a toe nail there. Most people get only molecules. Me? God gives to me for reasons I can’t fathom one of his green eyes.”

The lady with the TV show, Oprah Winfrey, will pay me a visit. She’ll sit on my maroon sofa with the damask covering and I will sit on the matching arm chair. This is what I will tell the world:

“Do Fish the Florist a favor and end his suffering. Stop your fighting, your wars, your deprivations, your hate campaigns in the name of God, your pissing on the world with your environmental garbage, your lusts that go nowhere, your overblown opinions, your coarse thoughts, your gossip, your selfish ways, your envy. Be so righteous that God blushes with shame that He put death into the world. Assemble the Messiah with your good deeds, let Him emerge from your pores, tunnel out your flesh, draw forth from you what belongs to Him that lies buried in your heart. Do this so my third green eye will return to where it came from and Rifka Leah will come and be my bride.”

After finishing my afternoon prayers, I recited a dozen Psalms and dressed slowly fumbling with the buttons as if I’m a small boy again. I marched downstairs and hung a “temporarily closed” sign on my shop door after poking a fluffy red carnation through the top button hole, an archaic gesture to be sure, but one that soothed my nerves. I slipped into new black leather shoes and hands shaking clipped a few stray hairs from my sideburns. The Q line subway car was waiting upon my arrival—nearly empty after the morning rush. One subway transfer and a short walk and that bastard on top of my head will no longer rule my life, I thought to myself.

I had rehearsed this a million times in my head but as I strolled into the lobby of the Times building my legs turned wobbly. A guard with piggish eyes and a heavy paunch sat lopsided and half-asleep at a large desk. In small circles, like a cautious buzzard, I approached him. “What do you want,” he asked?

Seized by panic, I forgot my plan to reveal myself first in the front offices. Compelled by fear, I prematurely lifted my skullcap and humbly bent my head.

First he trembled. Then he laughed. Horrified, I see he don't believe. He lifted his beefy hand. I screamed at him in Yiddish to stop but he don't understand. Gleefully, he reached over and jabbed it with his finger.

Who wouldn't jab a third eye with a fat finger? It's instinctual.

I bolt from the building praying for blindness; three eyes weeping, an image of Rifka Leah with her hands outstretched dissolving into nothingness.

On a bench I sit for hours as if buried in a snowdrift on this fine summer day. My third eye, made furious by love, has turned its wrath on the Almighty One and for the known world I hear myself recite through bitter lips (God forgive my arrogance), the prayer for the dead.