



THE

EYES

HAVE IT

BY

Michael J. Carroll

“You have a torn retina,” the ophthalmologist said. “We have to take care of it right away or you could lose sight in that eye.”

It was just a few days into the new year, near the end of my annual eye examination – “annual” being somewhat closer to two years in my case. I had seen the technician, soaked up the eye dilating drops and read the charts as well as I could: A – E – Q – I – 8. You know the drill. If you are lucky enough to read a row, they give you another, smaller row, and then a smaller one still until they stump you. Eventually you see nothing but blurs. Blurs with your right eye covered, blurs with your left eye covered, blurs with both eyes open. Blurs. Everyone fails in the end.

The doctor had come in when the technician left and peeked into my eye with something that looked like a jeweler’s magnifier. More drops, more lenses and more magnifiers followed. Some “Hmms,” some grunts, then he rolled back on his wheeled chair and doused the celestial light that was blinding me.

“You have a torn retina. You could go through life without a problem or your retina could detach in the next 10 minutes. You could lose sight in that eye – permanently. Fixing a tear should not be a very complicated procedure. I could do it right here in the office, but I will refer you to the specialist. You have to get it done right away. ASAP.”

Fine by me. The doc seemed competent enough, and his office adequate. I applauded him for finding the problem. But since our city had two of the finest eye hospitals in the world, I was all for using one for them for the laser surgery.

I rose slowly from the chair, moved tentatively down the hallway and stopped at the desk of the friendly dark-haired receptionist. She apologized in a subtly accented voice for her inability to contact the hospital to schedule “my procedure” because it was after 5 p.m.

“Tomorrow, first thing,” she promised with a hint of a smile.

I floated through the automated glass doors to the street. In my bleary eyed confusion I had already forgotten whether I was supposed to call them tomorrow, or if they were to call me. Lots to think about. Lots of news to process. News unknown an hour earlier.

As I walked the 10 blocks back to work the old Etta James song buzzed in my head.

“I’d Rather Go Blind,” Etta sang to me as I walked.

“Rather be blind...than to see you walking away.”



Next morning, at about 30 seconds after 9, I called the office of yesterday’s doc and got the answering service.

“Doctor’s office does not open until 9:30,” droned the just-out-of-bed middle-aged female voice.

“Pa-leeze call back.”

Another, more sympathetic female voice returned my call at 9:31 a.m. “The doctor can do the procedure today. You should come in right away. How soon can you get there?”

“I can be there in an hour, tops,” I assured her. “I just have to arrange a few things here at work and then hop on the subway. I’ll be there around 10:30.”

Three subway stops and a five-minute walk later I was at the eye hospital, passing through more glass doors.

Nice place. Nice people. Always impressive when an institution can move lots of patients through a system in a humane way, efficiently and kindly, if not always quickly. Something good going on. No sign of surly, beaten-down clerical and technical staff. Instead, staff that seemed to enjoy their work and were interested in it. Sensitive, but not submissive.

The technician was a young, [hip] woman who said clearly and directly that she felt lucky to be there. She had belted her hospital work uniform so that it looked like a skirt/pants combination.

“You’re lucky to have the doctor. People come from all over the country – all over the world really, to be seen by him.”

In between laying out lenses and lights, dropping eye drops in me, and making notes, she spoke of her hospital, her doctor, her New Jersey education and her daily journey from the Garden State.

“I studied at the community college, then moved on. ‘Still live in Jersey, near the shore. The commute is a little long, but it’s worth it.”

The tech smiled and handed me a tissue to dab away the excess drops that were leaking out of my eyes. She did not burden me with her entire life story, but answered freely my few questions, some asked out of curiosity, some to fill silences.

I then met the doc who would do the laser surgery. Nobody is perfect, but he was probably close to perfect where it counted, wielding the laser. He was in his 60s, tall, solid and vigorous. No glasses. An eye surgeon without glasses? Maybe they were in the



Photo by Jeff Lyons

pocket of his white coat. Maybe he had contacts.

His conversation skills were fine when it came to asking probing professional questions. Not so great on answering mine. A kindred spirit with the Sgt. Joe Friday character on the old “Dragnet” cop show: “Just the facts, sir. Just the facts.”

Not much for small talk. Bedside manner? Well, I was in a chair not a bed anyway. Competence trumps social skills in these situations if you have to choose. Not without a certain fondness, I termed him grumpy old man, a category I joined myself some days.

The electric laser chair was small for my 6’3” frame, or maybe insufficiently adjustable. Maybe the doc did not know where all the buttons were to move it up, down, and all around. Maybe he did not care to learn. I always seemed to be in an awkward, occasionally painful position, as he probed my eye with a sun-bright, whitish-yellow beam, then bombarded it with a powerful green, dreamy light. I could not say that it was exactly pain I felt under the laser bombardment, more like fluid pressure growing into a headache. I’m sure the laser doc tried to hold back but he kept sliding into a tone he might use with misbehaving grandchildren:

“Now don’t move. Every time you do that I have to start all over.”

God knows I was trying desperately not to move. Not moving at all as far as I could tell, trapped in that Spanish Inquisition chair. But anything was possible, and I was not about to call the laser doc a liar. Not even call him mistaken. Not me. Certainly not then and there. I wanted to cooperate. I most certainly did not want a slipped laser burning a hole clear through me because I jerked the doc or kicked the machinery.

“Look up and to the right. Up. Up,” he repeated, voice tightening.

Under a blast of green supernova light I was losing sense of up down, right, and left.

God help me, I may have moved.

All’s well that ends well.

“We’re finished. It’s over,” the laser surgeon said. Not unlike the

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transition from Mr. Hyde back to Doctor Jekyll, the doc was morphing back to the kindly man who first greeted me. Fading away was the strict, impatient grandfather.

I almost caused him to regress to Hyde for a moment when I tried to make small talk about discomfort and pain. Before I could complete my sentence he responded:

“Pain?! It’s all subjective. I couldn’t begin to tell you or understand what you’re saying.”

OK, Doc, I thought as I tried to sink into my chair. No offense intended. Didn’t mean to cause you pain, professional or otherwise.

He began to speak into a recorder, dictating a letter to yesterday’s general practitioner who had referred me to him.

“Thank you for allowing me to treat this patient. The procedure

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was successful and the patient handled it well.”

I smiled in flashed-out weariness. The patient handled it well? Why of course the patient handled it well!

He clicked off the recorder, swiveled his chair to face me, and cautioned: “No heavy lifting. No athletics. Any changes, call me right away. See you in 10 days. Stop out front to make the appointment.”

“See you then, doctor. Thanks.”



In the days after the laser I noticed things, visual colors especially. More precisely, since it was January I noticed the absence of color in the world. Drives on overcast Sunday winter afternoons were journeys through black-and-white photographs. Red stop signs on streets and green overhanging expressway messages were the most dramatic colorful breaks in a black, white and grey world. When it seemed no more color could be drained from the world, a light coating of snow swallowed what remained and left the world white.

I returned to my routines. I resumed swimming when the doc permitted, but no longer drifted mindlessly in the same pleasantly bored way as before. I noticed wet and bleary-eyed images. I noticed fogged-up clocks, drops on goggles and mist on windows.

Weekend films, even mediocre films, were vibrant and sharp.

It was all worth a look.



At work, a week after the laser, in the words of childhood cartoons, I started to “see spots before my eyes.” Less dramatically, and more accurately, I saw one spot off to the side of my wounded, healing eye. Every time I tried to follow it, damned if the little critter did not scurry out of view. I did not think much about it and went back to the work.

Around 4 that afternoon, I saw in the corner of my eye those floaters many people see now and then, especially as they age. I was sure it was nothing that could not wait the few days until my 10-day appointment, but why not call the laser doc? Indeed, why not?

“I told you to call me if there were any changes, didn’t I?” the laser doc forced through the phone. The strict grandfather was back.

“Seeing spots and floaters, that’s a change, isn’t it?! You’d better come in here right away to be checked out. I probably won’t be here when you get here,” the doc continued, laying on the guilt and expressing his displeasure with the prodigal son. “But someone will see you. Someone is here 24 hours.”

Oh, no. Not again, not that damn laser again, I thought. And why was my poor eye continuing to tear itself apart?

Someone less competent than the doc, no doubt, but someone. But whose fault was that? Certainly not the doc’s.

Once more into the subway. Back to another caring assistant with the charts, magnifiers, lights and drops. Back to the questions and answers. Finally in the doorway leaned the laser doc, arms folded and wearing a paternal smile. Irresponsibility forgiven...mostly forgiven.

He peered into my eye and started with “Tear in retina....” Oh, no. Not again, not that damn laser again, I thought. And why was my poor eye continuing to tear itself apart? Etta, oh Etta, I understand that you would rather be blind, but I wouldn’t. Not me. Before I could drive myself any crazier, he finished his sentence.

“(Tear in retina)...well lasered.” It was healing nicely.

The spots and floaters? Probably due to some pressure in the eye. Not good, but not terribly bad, either.

“See you in 10 days. After that we can space out the appointments further. But now that you had one tear, you’re at greater risk for developing another. We’ll always have to monitor you.”



I thought I might crack that he would “have to keep an eye on me,” but his look made me think better of it. A handshake – a firm look ‘em in the eye – handshake... and a “thanks, doc” seemed the better course.

Once more, slightly disoriented, bleary-eyed and weary, I slowly and carefully made my way back to the subway wearing those blind person-cataract plastic sunglasses.

All’s well that ends well, I suppose.

And if it’s all the same to you, Etta, I’d rather not go blind.

As for scheduling my annual cardiac check- up, I think I will wait just a little on that.

Michael J. Carroll, a public interest attorney, is a member of the editorial board of The Philadelphia Lawyer magazine.