

Spectra

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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I am dreaming. I reach out for something I have lost, something beautiful. I cannot remember what it is, but I know that it is there. Sounds echo in the background. My hands are stopped. I push against the barrier, straining, helpless. I open my eyes to darkness, and remember. I am lying in my sleeping place, with my hands pressed hard against the ceiling just above me, as if I could push it away and be free again. My hands move across the smooth cold surface to corners, as far apart as the width of my shoulders, down the walls to the narrow spaces at my sides. My hands stop, and I lie still.

There is a quick sharp pain in my leg as the cannulae withdraw from the valve implanted in my ankle. The bell that woke me rings again, the bell that calls us to our work. The panel opens at my feet, and light pierces the dark hole in which I am imprisoned. I turn over and crawl out, backward, bending my elbows so I don't scrape my back on the ceiling. I stand on the walkway among the formless gray shapes of the others. Our routine is unchanging, unchangeable. The walkway slides, taking us toward our consoles. Everyone around me whispers and laughs, but I am silent.

They all claim they know what beauty is. They say they see it every work period. They say the patterns that direct us calm and gratify and excite them. They are proud they are better than machines. They say it is ecstasy. If all I could remember was the blackness and the shadows and the broken bars of light, perhaps I could be as content, but I can never feel what they do.

The walkway stops. I turn, walk two steps, and slide into the seat of my console. The fear that touches me every day reaches deeper. I have tried to avoid the helmet before, and learned better. It engulfs my head, cutting off the shadows of my sight. The probes reach out and touch the metal sockets that replace my eyes. I flinch back, but I cannot move away. The probes enter, and the patterns begin.

I work hard. I do my duty. I watch the patterns of darkness and light and do what they tell me. But I want to see the day again.

The sky and the trees are what I remember most. The trees brushed their points against blue, all around our house. The bark was rough and the needles soft and sharp. When I climbed the trees my hands became sticky with golden pitch that left the smell of evergreen on my fingers. The sky was the color of my mother's eyes (I wonder if they took hers away, too?). I only saw the end of the sky once, when I walked too far and the forest stopped. I was very young. I stood at the edge of a cliff accompanied by wind and sun. And I saw that the sky ended in a yellow-brown roiling cloud. I ran home crying, real tears salty on my tongue, drying stiff on my face. My mother comforted me. She said the cloud would never come any nearer. I did not walk that way anymore, even when I was older and should not have been afraid.

A mild electric shock jerks me to awareness. Some error has been made. Three of us work on each set of patterns, as a check against mistakes. I look again, consciously, at the image in my brain. I do what it indicates. My error is confirmed and corrected. I cannot escape my punishment by drawing away or by bracing myself. It jolts through me, and my fingers clench. It is not too strong this time, but if I err again it will be worse. I think that's because they know that sometimes I make mistakes on purpose. The others say they never make mistakes. I don't believe it. I hate their silly patterns. It took them a long time to teach me how to figure out what each set of lines told me to do. They are all different, and I didn't want to learn.

When I was little I could make figures in the dark by pressing my fingers against the corners of my eyes. All the colors came, the ones that are in rainbows (it's so hard to remember rainbows... which was on top, violet or red?) and some that aren't. The jagged lines and circles and flowing creatures moved and danced and kept me company at night.

Now, when I'm supposed to be asleep, I remember my childhood companions and I touch my eyes. I always hope that the colors will return and that I'll see the day again. It's hard to remember what colors really look like. I hope, but I touch my closed eyelids and see nothing, and what I feel is hard and dead. Crystals and circuits and lenses that allow me to resolve dark bands into fine lines. It all seems very important to them. It is meaningless to me, and that makes me angry. Sometimes I claw at my eyes in the night. I know I should not.

One day as I was coming home I heard voices. Hidden by the corner of our house, I watched. I heard them call my mother selfish. They said we couldn't stay there anymore. She said they were wrong and they knocked her down. I cried stop it! stop it! and beat my fists against their chests. They pulled me away. I looked down and saw how small and frail she was. I tried to hit them again, but they laughed at me and knocked me down too, and when I woke up I was here, and the world was gray shadows. I wonder what they did to my mother...

The bands of light and dark fade. I stop. If I tried to keep working without information I would be punished again. It is time for exercise. They want to keep us healthy. The eyepieces withdraw from my dead sockets and the helmet lifts from my head. The world turns to gray, featureless, formless shapes. In this it is worse than when I am working, when the magnified patterns are sharp and clear.

I turn around on my chair and stand up. Two steps forward. The floor moves. The first time it moved beneath my feet I fell down. They had warned me about it. They were watching me my first day, so they punished me. After that I did not fall. The floor takes us all to a large room where the paleness of the walls is a little grayed by distance, and I can hear echoes.

The gray shapes of the others move around me. I know they cannot tell, and I think no one who can see is watching, but I am ashamed to be naked. We put our hands on metal bars and push. Around and around, until we perspire and the air drafts make us cold.

We all have glowing symbols on our backs, each different, so we may be identified. I can feel no difference on my skin, so I don't know how they are made. I push, and walk around and around. There is no symbol near me that I recognize. I hear conversations going on but they are all about the ecstasy of the lights and who had the most unusual pattern. My sweat tickles me, and I want to scratch. Finally the bars slow and lock. The shadows seem to spin around me. I almost fall. The pressure of the others forces me to keep my balance.

We make our way to the moving hall again. I feel disoriented and dizzy. We squeeze our eyelids shut and water gushes over us, cleaning the sweat away. The water is always too hot. Air dries us. Sometimes it is too cold, and we are not really dried at all.

I remember swimming in a deep dark pond near our little house. I wasn't ashamed to be naked there, and I liked the breezes that spread me with goosebumps. I remember grass and pebbles under my feet, and sun cushioning the wind on my back.

The helmet lowers and clasps my head unmoving. The eyepieces extend, enter, attach, and I am once more a receptacle for lines of black and bars of light. I no longer have to think carefully about what I am doing. I think of later, when I can lie down and rest. There will be no patterns and no shadows against the blackness where my sight should be. I think of the insubstantial varicolored companions of my childhood. I am lonely... I think of another way to touch my eyelids, a way I've never tried before, so my night friends may perhaps come back. I tell myself that I will be disappointed, but I do not believe it. I believe it will work. I want to close my eyes now and try, but my eyes cannot close here, and if I take my hands from the controls I will be punished again. I work with anticipation now, and eagerness, as if by doing so the time will pass more quickly.

I make an error. I cringe from the shock and my mouth is metallic. My mind has ignored a dark line. I do not understand how I could have missed it. I try again. The punishment surprises and hurts me. I do not know what I have done wrong. The shock recurs. My actions become almost erratic. Perhaps it is

their error--

The eyepieces withdraw abruptly. There is something wrong. The senseless punishments frighten me. The helmet releases me. I turn and get up and take two steps, because I know that's what I'm supposed to do. The floor begins to move. I can hear nothing but its glide, see nothing but the uniform paleness of walls passing me. There are no shadow people here, no people like me. Dark lines flash around me, around and around, spinning, enclosing me. I know what is the matter. There's something wrong with the things I use for eyes. I know they will blame me. I'm terrified that they will take away the last remnants of my sight. But now I think, if theirs will not work they will have to give me my real eyes back.

The floor stops. I am reeling. A door opens and a shadow person takes my arm and pulls me inside. I close my eyelids, screw up my face, keep my eyes shut tight. I want my real eyes back. Yours will not work much longer. I will not let you fix them, give me back my eyes.

They tell me to open my eyes. I almost smile. I can't open something I don't have. They tell me again. They slap me. I put up my arms to shield my face, and they slap me again. I can only make dry sobs. My eyelids open and the heavy things behind them drive the ugly shadows and lights into my brain. I am taken to a table and made to lie down. They put straps around me so I can't move, and they start to probe my eyes.

It hurts. It takes a long time, and I can't even see their shadows. It hurts.

They finish, they untie me, they thrust me out. I hear them laughing as I stumble onto the moving floor. It is an ugly sound. My head aches. I go back to my place and sit down. The lights are too bright, the blacks too dark, but I'm not allowed to stop. My hands are trembling. I remember that I've thought of a new way to make myself see, and for a while I can forget the pain.

Finally my time is up. The floor takes us back to our sleeping places. I crawl inside, crouching. I must fit my ankle against the cannulae or the panel at my feet will not slide shut, and I will be punished. I remember soft fragrant pallets of pine boughs and the pleasant soft scratchiness of those needles. Tonight I do not fear the pain. I do what is expected of me and wait for the panel to cut off the light.

I reach up and touch my eyes. Anticipation tickles my throat. It will be so good to see the colors again and remember what they really are. I know this way will work. I reach up--

My hands jerk away. They cannot punish me here. They cannot. This is my place, my time... I reach again, and the shock is stronger. My fingers jerk back reflexively and the back of my head hurts from the pressure of the bed. My hands creep up once more. The shock is so strong that the spark flashes back to my brain. I smell seared flesh, and my fingers are numb. I put them to my lips. I can taste blood. I know they will hurt tomorrow, when I must use them at my work.

But even if they did not hurt, I could not touch my eyes. The shadow people will not let me. If only they would, I know that I could see.

I want to cry. I wish that I had tears.

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