

## **A wheel in the desert, the moon on some swings**

by Jonathan Carroll

The first thing Beizer did after hearing he was going blind was to buy a camera.

He knew nothing about photography other than he liked a good picture as much as the next guy. Once in a while he'd see one so starting, original, or provocative that it would stop him and make him gape or shake his head in wonder at the moment or piece of the world caught there. But beyond that he had given it little thought. That's what was great about life: some people knew how to take pictures, others build chimneys or train poodles. Beizer believed in life. He was always grateful it had allowed him to walk in its parade. At times he was almost dangerously good natured. Friends and acquaintances were suspicious. Where did he get off being so happy? What secret did he know he wasn't telling? There was a story going around that when Beizer discovered a letter his girlfriend was writing to a new secret lover, he offered to buy her a ticket to this man so she could go visit and find out what was going on there. He said he wanted her to be happy--with or without him.

But now things would change! God or whoever had decided to give Norman Beizer a taste of the whip via this blindness. Friends were all sure he would change for the worse; start ranting and shrinking into self-pity and end up like the rest of them-tight-lipped, expert shruggers, looking for the answer in tomorrow.

Instead he bought this camera. A real beauty too--a Cyclops 12. Since he didn't know anything about the art, he went into the store and admitted idiot. That's what he told the salesman. "Look, I don't know about this stuff, but I want the best camera you have for absolute idiots. Something I can point and shoot and know it's doing all the work." The salesman liked his attitude, so instead of offering a Hiram Quagola or a Vaslov Cyncrometer, the kinds of cameras used by strict Germans to do black-and-white studies of celebrities' noses, he put the Cyclops on the counter and said, "This one. It'll take you an hour to get the hang of it and then you're on your way." Beizer did something strange. He picked the camera up and, holding it against his chest said, "Are you telling me the truth?"

When was the last time a stranger asked you that question? The salesman was flabbergasted. His job was lies and false zeal, fakes and passes behind his back. He had told the truth, but this customer wanted him to say it out loud, too,

"It's the best for what you want. Try it a couple of days and if you don't like it, bring it back and we'll find you something else."

The problem with the Cyclops was it was exactly what Beizer had asked for. It took an hour to read and understand the instructions. By the next morning, he had shot his first roll of film and had it developed. The pictures were as precisely focused and uninteresting as fast-food hamburgers. Everything was there; he'd

gotten what he paid for, but a moment after experiencing the picture he forgot it. The first of many revelations came to him. How many thousands and millions of times had certain things been photographed since the advent of the camera? How many times had people aimed at their pets, the Eiffel Tower, the family at the table?

Walking around the house one day trying to think of interesting and artistic things to photograph, he got down on his knees in the bathroom and took a picture of his toothbrush up through the glass shelf it rested on. That was pretty clever, but when he saw it developed, he frowned and knew at least a few hundred thousand people had probably had the same idea in one way or the other. Out there in the large world were drawers full of photos of toothbrushes shot "artily." Worse, other people had had to take the time to fix their shutters and set the speeds because cameras had never been so sophisticated as they were now. Now they were point, shoot, baf, you've got your toothbrush. But back whenever, one had to think, adjust and figure out how they'd get that shot. There was process and careful thought involved.

While this played across his mind, he heard shouts through the open window and realized kids were having fun in the park across the street. Their calls were wild and screechy and he thought, If I were going deaf, how could I preserve those great sounds so that in my silence I could somehow remember them exactly and know them again? We're all aware that in the end the only thing left is our memories, but how do you preserve them when one part of you decides to die before the rest? He realized he had bought this camera so he could go around seeing the world he knew for the last time and in so doing, perhaps teach his memory to remember. But that wouldn't work if he had a mindless genius machine that did exactly what he told it to but gave him nothing of himself in return. It was like those exercise machines with electrodes you hook up for your body, then lie down and rest while electricity makes you thin and muscular.

He went back to the store. When the salesman saw him again he was almost afraid. Beizer decided to tell the man everything. About the blindness, about his need to find a camera that would not only do what he told it, but teach him how to see and remember as well.

As he walked to the counter, he thought that whatever machine he left with this time, he would use a week to learn its principles, then allow himself to take only ten pictures before he put it down forever. The doctor said he had about three months before the disease marched across his vision dragging a black curtain behind it and then that would be the end. In the ninety days he had left, he would try to learn and consider and achieve all in one. Ten pictures. Ninety days to take ten pictures which, when his sight was gone, would have to provide his empty eyes with what he had lost.

The salesman heard him out and immediately suggested he go to a store specializing in books of great photography. "First look at books on Stieglitz and Strand. The guys in the Bauhaus School. They were the masters. That's the best

way to start. If you wanted to learn how to paint, you'd go to a museum and look at da Vinci." "It won't help. I'll look and maybe see some great stuff, but that won't help me remember. I don't even want to remember what they . . ." Beizer held his hands up to the sides of his head as if showing the other how little space he had to fill there. "I don't want to learn how to paint or take pictures. I want to remember my sights, not theirs. And I don't have much time left."

The salesman shrugged." Then I don't know what to tell you. There are two directions to take: I can give you a child's camera. The simplest thing in the world, which means you'll have to do all the work. When you want to take a picture, the lighting will have to be perfect, the focus, everything will have to be perfect, the focus, everything will have to be there because the camera won't do anything for you but click; just the opposite of the Cyclops which does everything. The other way is to buy a Hasselblad or a Leica, which are the tops. But it takes years and thousands of pictures to figure out how to use them. I don't know what to tell you. Can I think about it some more?" But for the time being perhaps that was best; having the right camera meant he'd have to begin to start deciding. In this interim without one, he could go around looking at the world, trying to choose.

A few blocks from home, a man sat on the street with a hat turned over on his lap and a hand-written sign that said, "I am blind and heartbroken and have no work. Please be kind and help me." There were a few brown coins in the hat. "Are you really blind?"

The beggar raised his head slowly and smiled. He was used to abuse. Some people taunted him. Now and then they'd ask stupid questions but then give him money if they liked or pitied his response. Before he had a chance to answer, whoever stood above said, "Tell me what you miss most about not seeing and I'll give you ten dollars."

"Fried chicken. Can I have ten dollars, please."

Beizer was stunned but went for his wallet. "I don't understand." He handed over the money.

The blind man brought the bill to his nose and sniffed it. It was money, he was sure of that. Maybe even ten bucks. Why not? The world was full of lunatics. Why not this one? "You know smoking? A cigarette is three things--smell, taste, and sight. You gotta see that gray going out your mouth and up in the air to really enjoy a cig. I stopped smoking about a month after I went blind. I know guys who can't see but keep doing it, but it's a waste of time, you ask me. Same thing's true with fried chicken. Taste it, smell, do all that, but seeing it's most important. The way that gold skin cracks when you pull it apart, the smoke coming up from the pink meat underneath if it's just fresh, then the shiny oil on your fingertips after you're finished. . . . Don't get me wrong, I still eat it, but it isn't the same. You gotta see to really eat it."

Beizer gave him another ten dollars, and went right home to write that line down: "You gotta see to really eat it." A week later, he found another in a book he was reading on photography: "The celebrated painter Gainsborough got as much pleasure from seeing violins as from hearing them."

Somewhere in the land where those two ideas lived was what he sought and Beizer knew it.

The girlfriend called, having returned from the romantic trip he had paid for. "It didn't work. Know what he did, among other things? Sent these incredible love poems I thought he'd written specially for me. Turns out he only copied them out of an anthology he kept from college.

"I'm sorry I haven't called. What have you been doing?"

"Going blind."

"Oh my God!"

They spoke a long while before she said gently, "Honey, you can't do photography when you're blind."

"Actually you can; I heard there's a whole bunch of blind people taking wonderful pictures. But that's not what I'm after. I don't want to do photographs--I want to be sure to remember fried chicken and what violins look like." After hanging up, he thought over what she'd said about this man trying to pass off other people's poetry for his own. Other people's deepest-felt emotions. It was a clever way to trick a heart but what did it say about the man? Beizer turned a few facts here and there and saw himself showing someone a famous picture he had not taken and saying, "This is one of my ten. This will comfort me when I can no longer see."

That night he woke up and padded slowly across the dark to the toilet. Relieving himself, he realized this was what it would be like when he was old. Getting up, probably nightly, to go to the bathroom because one's plumbing begins to weaken as we grow older. A familiar sound from when he went to visit his parents--the toilet next to their bedroom flushing in the wee hours of the morning. The wee hours. That made him smile. A good title for a poem. "Weeing in the Wee Hours." He should give it to the poem stealer. . . . Sleepily finishing his business, Beizer once again had the feeling of some invisible connection here. Finding it would help him overcome the problem of the pictures he wanted to take.

In bed again quickly slipping back into sleep, he thought poems are as personal as fingerprints. Steal one and you instantly give your own identity, as if you were actually giving up the lines on your fingers or the features on your face.

The features on his face! He started, sat up, very much awake. And old man peeing in the night. What would he, Norman Beizer, look like when he was seventy and holding his old cock in his hand? He's never know. He couldn't look at

someone else's pictures of that! Too soon he's never know how the first deep lines on his face would change him, what white hair would do to his appearance. These are important details.

He had begun to grow used to the idea of how much time would be wasted in his future. The seconds lost spent on useless fumbling for a wall switch or the string to pull a curtain across. To move a curtain was a much larger concern for the blind. First find the strings, figure out which is the correct one, pull it. A matter of seconds for a person with sight, for the blind it would take three, four, five times unfairness of that, all the time he'd soon need to waste on what he did now with no trouble. But how much of Beizer would be lose when he could no longer see him in the mirror. Watch the progress of time and life across that most familiar geography? He sensed in time he would be able to accept the loss and forced limits that were coming, but until now he hadn't realized something so important--he would also lose large parts of himself.

The next morning he called up the offices of Vogue magazine and Paramount Pictures. After running the gamut of questioning secretaries, he was finally put through to the proper people who, in both cases, were surprisingly kind and helpful. He asked the woman at the fashion magazine who she thought was the greatest portrait photographer in the city. Without hesitation she said Jeremy Flynn and gave him the name of the photographer's agent. At Paramount, the vice president in charge of something said the greatest makeup person in the world was so-and-so. Beizer carefully noted the names and addresses. He had expected more trouble finding these things out but perhaps since he had figured out his problem, the solution slicked into place like the gears of a car engaging. He called the photographer and the makeup person and made appointments to see both of them. They charged an obscene amount of money, but the best were always worth it, particularly in this case.

When he met them, he explained his situation with almost exactly the same words: He was fast going blind. Before that happened, he wanted to see what he would look like for the rest of his life. He was hiring them to help him get as close to that as possible. The visagist should make him up to look as convincingly sixty, seventy, eighty as possible. Knowing his family history of bad hearts dying somewhere in their seventies, Beizer assumed his would, too. So his face at seventy would be close enough to his final days to satisfy.

The photographer was fascinated by the idea. He recommended pictures done with no tricks--no special lighting or backgrounds. Just Beizer in a dark suit and a white shirt. That way, his face would take up the entire world. The eye would be forced to look at the face and nothing else. Yes! That was exactly what he wanted.

At the end of their meeting, Flynn asked what good would the pictures be when Beizer could no longer see them. "Because I will have seen them. I'll be able to put them in front of someone and say, 'Is that what I'm like now? Tell me the difference between what's on paper and what you see.'"

“Points of reference.”

“Exactly? Points of reference.”

“Will you remember what’s there? Even after years of not having seen?” “I don’t know. I have to try.”

The big day came and he had the astonishing experience of seeing himself age forty years in one afternoon. Like time-lapse photography, he saw brand-new wrinkles groove his face, making it into something foreign and funnily familiar at the same time. He saw his hair disappear, his eyes turn down, skin like bread dough hand from his chin and neck. If an experience can be funny and terrifying at the same time, this was it. Each time he was eager to see what the next decades would do to him, but when the makeup man said, “Okay have a look,” Beizer was hesitant. He kept saying, “You think that’s what I’ll really look like?” But down deep he knew it was.

So, this was it. Him for the next forty years. When he was a boy, he was a terrible sneak when it came to Christmas presents. Every year he was driven to find where all of his gifts were hidden, so that weeks before the big day, he knew exactly what he was getting. This was the same thing. Now he knew what he would be “getting” as the years passed.

And one would think that seeing himself across the rest of this life like that would have had some kind of large effect on Beizer, but the only real emotion he felt at the end of the session was amusement. When they were finished, he told the other two this and both said the same thing--wait till you see the pictures. In real life a person wearing makeup looks . . . like a person wearing makeup. Especially if it is thick and involved. But wait till Flynn’s photographs were ready. Then he’d see a hell of a difference. Any great photographer knows how to cheat light and time. Flynn loved the idea of showing this man the rest of his life in pictures. He planned to use these as the nucleus of his next exhibition and thus would spend even more time than usual making them as perfect as he could.

The call came very late at night. Beizer had been watching television and eating a plum. He didn’t know what he enjoyed more--looking at the TV or the fat purple plum with the guts of a sunrise. “Norman? This is Jeremy Flynn. Am I disturbing you?”

“Not at all. Have you finished the pictures?”

Flynn’s voice was slow in coming and when it came, it sounded like he was testing every word before he let it walk across his tongue. “Well yes, yes I just tonight started to work on them. But there’s a . . . well, I don’t know how to out it. This is a crazy question because I know it’s really late, but do you think you could come over here now?”

“At eleven at night? I really want to see them, Jeremy, but can’t we do it

tomorrow?”

“Yes we can. Of course we can, but Norman, I think you’ll want to see them now. I think you’ll want to see them very much now.”

“Why?”

Flynn’s voice went up three notches to semihysterical. The other day in his studio he had been very calm and good natured. “Norman, can you please come? I’ll pay for your taxi. Just, please.”

Concerned, Beizer put his plum down and nodded at the phone. “Okay, Jeremy, I’ll come.”

Flynn was standing in the doorway of his house when Beizer arrived. He looked bad. He looked at the other like he’d arrived in the nick of time.

“Thank God you’re here. Come in. Come in.”

The moment they stepped into the house and he’s slammed the door behind them, Flynn started talking. “I was going to work on them the whole night, you see? I was going to give the whole night over to seeing what we’d done the other day. So I set everything up and did the first roll. Do you know anything about developing film?” He had Beizer by the arm and was leading him quickly through the house.

“No, but I’d like to learn. I don’t think I told you, but his whole thing started when--”

“It doesn’t matter. Listen to this. I did the developing. I always do my own. And then I--here we are, in here. Then I got down to the first prints. Do you want to sit down?”

Flynn was acting and speaking so strangely, so rushed and strangled, like he’d swallowed air and was trying to bring it back up again.

“No, Jeremy, I’m fine.”

“Okay. So I put the first ones down, all ready to see you, you know, looking fifty or sixty? I had all these great ideas of how to work with the paper to get this special effect I’ve been thinking about--but when I saw what was on the film, the film I took of you, I panicked.”

Beizer though he was joking, but also knew instinctively that he wasn’t because of the scared seriousness of Flynn’s voice. “What do you mean you panicked? Did I look so ugly?”

“No, Norman, you didn’t look like anything at all. You weren’t in the pictures.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look for yourself.” Flynn opened a very large manila envelope and slowly slid out a glossy photograph. It was of a large wheel stuck in the sand of a desert landscape.

“That’s nice. What is it?”

“It’s you, Norman. Look at this one.” Flynn slid out another photograph. A half-eerie, half-romantic picture of moonlight slanting across an empty set of swings on a playground. Beizer tried to speak but the photographer wouldn’t let him. He took out another picture, then another and another. All of them different, some strange, some beautiful, some nothing special.

When he was finished, he put his hands on his hips and looked at his subject suspiciously. “That is the roll of film I took of you, Norman. There was no mistake because I purposely left the film in the camera after I shot the other day. Those pictures are what the camera took of you.

“I hate to tell you, Jeremy, but I’m not a wheel, or, a swing.”

“I know that. I didn’t ask you over here to play a joke on you. That’s what I have, Norman. This is no joke. Those are the pictures I took of you the other day.”

“How am I supposed to respond to that?”

“I don’t know.” Flynn sat down. Then he stood up. “No, I do know. I have to say something else. I have to tell you, whether it helps or not. Maybe it’ll even scare you. When I was young and learning to develop pictures, I took a whole roll on time of a girl I knew who I had a crush on. Kelly Collier. That same day I went into the darkroom to do them because I was so eager to have them. While I was in there, she and her mother were killed in a car accident. Naturally I didn’t know that, but none of the pictures came out with her image. They came out like these.”

“You mean swings and a wheel?”

“No, but things like that. Objects. Things that had nothing to do with her. I’ve never told anyone the story, but Norman, this is exactly the same thing that happened with Kelly. Exactly. I took the pictures and she died. The I took these pictures while you’re going blind. There’s got to be a connection.”

“You think it’s your fault?”

“No, I think . . . I think sometimes the camera is able to catch things as they’re about to happen. Or as they’re happening. Or . . .” Flynn licked his lips. “I don’t know. It has something to do with change. Or something to do with--”

Beizer tried to speak when he heard the other’s confusion. Because he realized it did have to do with change. As he looked longer at the picture in front of him and listened to the other speak, he began to understand. What had happened was Flynn’s camera had photographed their souls--the dead girl’s and Beizer’s--as they



were going through . . . as they lived different things. A soul was able to try to different existences as if they were clothes in a wardrobe. Of course a soul knows what's coming. Beizer believed the human soul knew everything; naturally with the girl, it knew her body was about to die. And in his own case, it knew what it would be like blind. So even while living in them, their souls were going out looking, traveling, window shopping for what they would become next. That was what the camera had somehow managed to capture. This plain metal and plastic, chemicals and glass had all worked together to catch two souls experimenting or playing, or whatever the word was for living a while in their future. Or was it their past? Maybe they'd like to rest in the moonlight and be swung on by day. Or maybe they were only reliving what it was like to be wheels, useless and thus marvelous out in a desert.

How did he know this? How could a plain, nice, dull man like Norman Beizer realize something so secret and profound? Because as Flynn spoke, Beizer began to recognize the photographs laid in front of him. Whatever part of him had been there in them suddenly and distinctly remembered being cold metal out in the moonlight, or the heat of sand all around him. He recognized and remembered the feelings, temperatures, sounds . . . that were in each of the pictures.

What was even better, he knew that that was what he would remember when he went blind. It would be enough, more than enough, for the rest of one life. He didn't need a camera, or ten unforgettable pictures, or portraits of himself as an old man. With this new understanding, he would have the ongoing knowledge and memories of where his soul had been. Until he died, blind or not he would share the feelings and adventures of the part of him that was universal and curious. The part that was traveling, experiencing, knowing hotel lives of things. Things like wheels, like swings. One more bustling soul out there looking for what to do next.