

Pure Vision by Robert Reed

When they cut my hours back for the last time, I was left with Saturdays and Monday afternoons, which was all right. It was still regular money, and back then, a little cash always seemed like enough. Besides, I kept a little girlfriend who happened to make enough for both of us.

There wasn't much work to do, what with the store going under in another few weeks. I was free to watch people wandering past, guessing who belonged here and who was simply lost. I could talk to the customers—the last of our regulars, mostly—some who just happened to be girls. Excuse me, young women. Who usually didn't know my girlfriend, so the chances were pretty low that my conversations would get back to her. Or if I wanted, I could just sit at the counter and read the inventory. Not that there was much to choose from anymore. I could see straight through the book racks, looking all the way to the back wall. Prices on hardcovers and mass markets had been coming down in little tumbles and big leaps, but now they'd hit bottom, and the only titles remaining were the ones nobody wanted. By the end, our business was mostly magazines, which is a lot like selling bananas. The bananas came to us fresh, but if we couldn't get rid of them by the end of the week or the month, we'd peel off their covers for the refunds and throw the fruit in the trash.

Monday was magazine day. That's why I got to work in the afternoon. The manager needed somebody at the cash register while he sorted and counted the magazines, before he set them out on the stacks. I'll call him Barry. We were friends once, Barry and me, although I can't remember why. I would come in after lunch on Mondays, and he'd vanish into the back room, and when he was ready, he'd bring out the week's crop. Our moneymakers were the old standards: Playboy and Penthouse, Hustler and Swank. Except now I've heard that Penthouse is in bankruptcy. That just doesn't seem possible. Who ever went broke selling pussy?

Anyway, it was Barry's job to count each and every Penthouse Forum, and this story doesn't have much more to do with him.

That Monday, I was sitting at the counter, reading. There wasn't anybody else in the store, except for a couple regulars parked in front of the porn. I'm not sure what I was reading, but it was good—probably an Elmore Leonard with the cover stripped off. I know I wasn't paying attention to very much else. For instance, there was this weird little guy hovering in the hallway, and for a long time, I barely noticed him.

Hovering. That's the only word for it.

He was standing there maybe twenty minutes before I gave him a glance. He was maybe twice my age. Middle-aged, in other words. Somewhat fat, but dressed in a nice suit, like a successful lawyer or an insurance hound would wear. Looks-wise, he was totally ordinary, with smart eyes and thick glasses. But more than anything, what I remember about the guy is that he looked really, really scared. And that made him interesting. I finally gave up reading just to watch him standing in front of the locked glass door to the Old Optical Shoppe, apparently waiting for somebody to show.

This was every Monday afternoon. When you're on the second floor of a shopping mall that's buried inside a dying downtown ... when you're surrounded by office buildings where people are chained to desks, and breaks can't last more than ten minutes ... you get accustomed to the endless sound of nothing and nobody....

I called over to the stranger.

Offering friendly advice, I said, "They've closed down."

He had to have heard me. But for a long second, Mr. Good-suit didn't seem to notice. Standing with his

back to the eyewear store, his head swiveled side to side, and then sometimes he looked over his shoulder, as if he was afraid somebody could have slipped past and opened the store up without him noticing.

"They're closed," I said.

"Which I know," he interrupted, almost before I spoke. Then he shook his head and pushed his fat glasses against his damp round face, and with an absolutely terrified voice, he asked, "When will the doctor return?"

The doctor?

A face came to me. Middle-aged men always looked alike to me back then, just as kids today seem to be pretty much interchangeable. The optometrist who ran the store was one of those fellows who look like they were born as fifty-year-olds. Big and balding, and tired in some deep way. But really, I hadn't seen him or anybody else in there, not for a couple weeks. Barry claimed they'd gone out of business. Which is what I told the little guy, adding, "I don't know why they haven't gotten their gear yet. Bank problems, most likely."

One last time, the little guy looked through the sliding glass door. But nobody had miraculously appeared. No receptionist sitting at the front desk, and no trace of the optometrist either.

"If you want," I said, "you can wait over here."

Not that anybody was going to show up, of course.

But the guy gave a little nod and shuffled over. And then, he suddenly looked at me. He looked into my face. And something he saw made him smile.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

He started to hover in front of my counter now. I looked at the guys flipping through the porn. I looked back at my book. Then quietly, he said, "You were a customer there too. Weren't you?"

"What's that?" I said.

"Your glasses," he told me, reaching toward his own face.

My glasses had big lenses and dark plastic frames, and they were ugly-cheap, and when I look at photographs of myself from those days, I have to wonder how I ever managed to get laid.

"What about my glasses?" I asked.

"You were a customer," he repeated softly, almost whispering. Then he pointed a thumb back over his shoulder, adding, "Like I was."

Twice, maybe three times, I'd had my ugly-ass glasses adjusted in the Old Optical Shoppe, since it was free and convenient. And I guess that made me a customer, which was why I could nod and say, "Sure, I've used the place," and sound perfectly honest.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

I had to think.

Before I could answer, he asked, "Is your prescription holding?"

My eyes have always been crap. I was the first kid in class to get glasses, and without them, I couldn't make out a face at twenty feet. But by then, nothing much was changing in my eyes anymore. Not on a year-to-year basis, at least. I'd had that particular pair of glasses for the last three or four years, and I still saw well enough to read and keep from bumping into walls.

"My prescription's holding up just fine," I told him.

He smiled, but not in a simple happy way. He looked sad now, and for a moment, I could see jealousy flaring up.

Then he sighed and shrank down a little.

"What?" I asked. "Your prescription isn't holding?"

"Isn't that obvious?" he said.

A lot of things are obvious. If you let them be.

"Tough luck," I offered.

He glanced across the hall again. "Do you know where the doctor went?"

To jail, I wanted to say. Not that I had any real knowledge, but honestly, that guy used to weird me out. He was kind of drugged-up-vague and peculiar in hard-to-point-to ways. At first glance, he didn't even look like a medical professional, or even a halfway decent butcher. I remembered him having big hands and a stupid comb-over, and his glasses were thick as those glass bricks people use to build walls with. I remembered a voice dripping with some accent, probably from the middle of Europe somewhere. An accent you can never pin any country or language to. And that's as much as I could recall then, thinking on the fly, trying to figure out this nervous little fat guy in his thousand-dollar suit.

"Do you have a new address?" he asked. "Or a phone number, maybe?"

I could have played this a hundred ways. But only one of those ways would have been honest, and when given a choice, I don't like honest.

"Maybe," I said.

"Maybe which?" he asked. "An address or phone number?"

"Maybe both," I told him. "But maybe I won't tell you."

Really, I've seen some desperate faces. When I was still a kid, I'd already known a few people pushed to the edge, or farther, and just by watching their eyes, I knew that you could see them starting to tumble. But this fellow was the worst. Easily. He looked frightened and lost and stupid and mad at himself for feeling that way. Which made it fun, playing a little game at his expense.

He sputtered for a moment or two. Then again, he looked across the empty hallway, wishing hard for things.

"Go down the escalator," I told him, "and west one block. There's a perfectly good Pearle Vision waiting for your money."

"No," he muttered.

"Why this store?" I asked.

"Do you know, or don't you?"

"Maybe I do," I said, "and maybe I don't."

"Well, I can't tell you why," he whispered.

"That's your right, I guess."

In a tight little voice, he said, "You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Why not?"

"You'd think I'm making this up."

"I don't know what you're making up," I pointed out. "Tell me your story, and maybe I'll give you his new address."

"No," he grunted.

"Fine," I said.

I went back to reading, or at least pretending to read. And after maybe twenty seconds of nervous silence, he said, "All right. I'll tell you what happened...."

Call him Jones. Or Smith. Or call him Poppycock, for all I care. I don't remember his name, and maybe I never heard it. He said the doctor's name twenty times, but I've never been much at remembering Hungarian or Bulgarian or whatever kind of name it was. The story is about Jones and the doctor. With Barry sitting unseen in the office, counting Forums, and two regulars camped out in front of the porn section, off in their own sloppy little worlds. And then there is me.

"My old glasses broke," Jones reported. "I was rubbing my nose one morning, while I was at work, and the pad came off. The right pad. It slipped free, and I couldn't put it back on again."

"I bet that hurt," I offered.

"I needed them fixed," he said. "Right away. And since I wasn't working far from here, and I'd walked past this place a few times ... and I knew they never were particularly busy.... "He found something to smile about. "I came here on my lunch hour. Just to get the new pad. There wasn't any receptionist, or any technician at the desk. But the store was open, from what I could tell. I came in and rang the bell, and I sat and waited, and I rang maybe two more times. Then I got up to leave, and the doctor came out of his examination room."

I nodded, remembering how the only times I ever saw the doctor was when he was coming out of that room or going back in again. And whenever I saw him, he was staring at people—at me and at everyone—and doing it in a way that never put anyone at ease.

"He said something to me," Jones reported. "May I help you?" or words to that effect. But before I could answer, he pulled a little slipper made of silicone from his coat pocket, and like that, my glasses were fixed.

"He gave them back, and I put them on.

"Your right ear is sore, isn't it?" he asked me.

"I hadn't noticed, but yes, it was a little bit uncomfortable.

"Let me make an adjustment,' he said. Then he started working with the usual little tools, bending and tightening and then setting the glasses back on my face again. Which was a very strange moment, I realized later. How many times have you had your glasses adjusted? And how many times has the person behind the counter gotten it perfect on the very first attempt?"

Now that he mentioned it, I realized the doctor had done pretty much the same trick with me.

"Take your glasses off again,' the doctor told me. 'Please.'

"Why?' I asked.

"Just pull them away from your eyes, please. I want to see what I can see.'"

Jones hesitated for a moment, and then confessed, "I've never been a particularly alert person. You know? Things would happen around me, and maybe I'd notice a quarter of it, if that much. And the important, subtle stuff would just slip right by."

"What kinds of stuff?" I asked.

"Everything," he said, as if it was obvious. For a moment, he looked lost and sad. "The doctor stared at my eyes for a long time. It was as if he could see qualities, genuine qualities that needed to be measured or counted, or whatever. And then he unlocked a drawer and pulled out a contraption. Like a pair of glasses, only with extra lenses sticking out every which way.

"He started flipping lenses back and forth, and then he handed it to me.

"Put your glasses back on,' he told me. 'Then set this on top of them.'

"I did what he wanted.

"Then he pointed across the hall and said, 'Go look around. Look at the faces, and come back here and tell me what you saw.'"

At that point in the story, I had to laugh. "Oh, yeah," I told the little man. "I remember you now."

"But you don't," Jones replied.

"Sure I do. A guy wearing those funny glasses ... I remember you and them, now that you mention it ... !"

"But you weren't working that day."

"No?"

"A red-haired girl was behind the counter," Jones explained. "She was wearing a tight blouse and too much eyeliner, and she was sitting on that stool, her back straightened up, and her pretty face working hard not to cry."

I didn't know what to say.

"A boy had hurt her," he needed to tell me. "Hurt her very badly."

"She told you that?"

"I saw it."

"What do you mean, you saw it?"

He gave me this long, hard look. Then with a quiet voice, he asked, "Didn't you imply that you're one of the doctor's patients?"

"The girl used to work here," I reported. "Her name's Janice, and she's had a lot of man trouble."

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"I thought we were discussing Janice."

Jones pushed his glasses closer to his eyes, like anyone does when their prescription is failing. "Have you ever seen a human soul?" he said to me. Then before I could answer, he asked, "If there was a way for you to peer inside the head of a stranger and see the person within ... what would you give for that kind of talent, my friend...?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

Then he nodded while squinting. "You'll get over the boy," I told her. I told Janice. "Just looking at you, I can tell. You deserve somebody better."

Optometrists aren't real doctors, not like an ophthalmologist is. But the doctor was much more than your typical shopping-mall optometrist. Born in an obscure village in the Balkans—an isolated hamlet where families had a long history of odd wizardry and small-scale magic—he had inherited a penetrating kind of vision from both sides of his family. Still a young man when he escaped to the West, he realized that he needed to make a living, which was why he went to school and learned about nearsightedness and astigmatisms and how to correct for these common weaknesses. But the doctor remained interested in other elements of sight and perception—qualities not covered in any of his textbooks. On his own time, he fashioned lenses from glass and rare elements and ancient enchantments as well as his own intuition. The natural talent of his eyes reached only so far, which was why the doctor used himself as a subject for his studies. Over the years, in tiny stages, he invented new arts and recultured old ones, producing a set of lenses that saw humanity in its truest, purest form.

Jones explained this to me, and then he suddenly removed his glasses, setting them on the counter between us.

"Pick them up," he told me.

They were heavy, maybe twice as heavy as I expected. Which explained why his nose wore two ugly red marks where the pads dug in. Inside the lenses, I could see the ordinary lines where the bifocals began. But there was more to them than you'd see in ordinary lenses. I held them up to the light, spying little ripples and colored smears and hints of something that looked like old writing. Then I pulled off my own glasses and started to put on his, looking straight at him—

"Don't," Jones warned me, snatching them back.

"Why? What would I see?"

"They wouldn't work for you," he muttered.

"You're sure?"

"No, I'm not." But he had the glasses perched on his battered nose again. "I just can't let you wear them," he explained. "One of his rules was that I never, ever let anyone else put them on."

"He has rules?"

"He was very specific about what was expected of me," Jones said. "These tools came with some clear-cut conditions."

I nodded, glancing across the hall for a long moment. Then I looked back at him, remarking, "That's a really sweet suit you're wearing."

It was very nice. Wool, I think, and well tailored. But all he wanted to say was, "I can never use my vision to hurt people."

"Of course you can't."

"When it's possible, I have to help people."

"Isn't that everybody's obligation?" I asked.

He glanced at the doctor's store again. Then he quietly told me, "I don't live in town anymore. The last three years ... well, I've done pretty well for myself at work, and I was transferred to a different division ... never mind where..."

"But your eyes are changing," I guessed.

"In the usual ways, no. My prescription is still good enough. But he warned me that there would be fluctuations in my new vision. The rare elements inside the glass would wander, and the polarities would be lost. Whatever that means. But mostly, I think his magic weakens as time passes."

"So you came back here to visit him?"

Jones nodded once, the old despair resurfacing.

"Any other rules?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said.

But I didn't particularly care what the doctor had told him. So I said, "Be honest. How many people have you hurt with this new pure vision of yours?"

That won a hard stare.

I didn't need special lenses to see everything. The suit was enough, and that look of pure cold terror in his puffy face.

"You're sure you want to find the doctor?" I asked. "Because when he sees your soul, for himself, he's going to ask, 'Why should I help you?'"

Jones halfway collapsed against my counter.

By then, it was just the two of us in the store. The regulars had left the porn section dog-eared and done. Barry was still counting magazines in the back room, invisible to the world. And I looked over at the Old Optical Shoppe one more time, saying with a quiet little voice, "I can't help you find him. I don't know any addresses or phone numbers, sorry. Wherever the doctor went, he didn't leave his forwarding address."

I could hear my new friend breathing, slowly and deeply.

"But you know what," I added. "I don't think anybody's taken so much as a display frame out of that

store. Which means that at the very least, those test glasses you wore once ... they're probably still waiting inside that drawer...."

I told Barry that I would close for him, as a favor, and after he did his celebratory dance and went home, I told the final customer, "Wait in the back room, out of sight. I'll come get you when it's time."

Until then, everything had been just so much talk. Jones stared at me through his failing glasses, trying hard to measure my soul. But he couldn't. So then he shivered and held his mouth closed, and after a moment, he said, "You haven't told me. How exactly do we get past that locked door?"

"That part's easy," I said. "We'll just heave a couple Stephen Kings through the glass."

"You're teasing," he observed.

"Yeah, it's just a joke." Then I showed him my eyes, saying, "You've got to ask yourself: How much is this really worth to you?"

He nodded and sighed, then slipped off into the back.

I counted out the cash from the register and made out the deposit slip for the bank. Right on time, our lone security guard wandered past. He was a teenager, and just about as dim as a person can be. I said, "Hey," and handed him a fresh copy of *Hustler*. "On the house."

"Thanks," he gushed, rolling it up and hurrying off to the can.

I went back inside and collected up Jones, plus a tackle box full of mostly useless tools. We crossed the hall, and I set the box down and pulled out the biggest hammer and a little crowbar.

Jones swallowed. "You can do this?"

"Easily," I promised.

He touched the door, saying, "This looks like a good lock."

"I've popped a few of these annoyances in my day," I told him. Which was the truth. "One good smack, that's all I need."

Except the mechanism was tougher than I'd guessed. It took a few whacks and some hard jerks with the crow bar. But there was nobody around to hear us, and after the latch was busted, I pulled the door open just far enough to slip inside.

The air smelled stale, but nothing more—stale and dusty and lit only by the lights in the hallway. How many weeks had the place been closed? Two? Four? Or was it longer? I wasn't sure, and I didn't care. Jumping over the countertop, I started pulling open drawers, finding nothing but little tools and tiny screws, cannibalized frames and somebody's lunch, forgotten and wrapped in a wrinkled brown sack.

"Those glasses were where?" I asked.

"Somewhere," said Jones, barely paying attention to me. He was trying to get into the doctor's exam room, growling, "Locked," every time he tugged at the door's brass knob.

Down low was a small metal drawer, and it was locked, too.

I dug out a big screwdriver and stuck my head into the hallway for a couple seconds, making sure we were alone. Then I went back in and jabbed hard, wrenching the drawer open on the first try.

"There's a light on," Jones whispered. "Behind this door."

I pulled out a heavy piece of handmade equipment. Lenses rode on hinges and two stems were made from pot metal, while the frames were big enough to hold a couple of Hubble telescopes. It was ugly and familiar. I had seen it before, on at least two occasions. Both times middle-aged guys were wearing this apparatus, walking up and down the hallway, staring like idiots at every passing face.

I was looking the contraption over, deciding what to try first.

Jones had taken my crowbar. Then with a splintering of wood, he pried the door open, letting the fluorescent light wash over us.

"Oh, God," he said.

I turned.

"Jesus," he said, stepping inside and then backing out again. His face was sweaty, eyes filling up his big glasses. He looked terrified and weak, and after a couple deep breaths, he decided to back up even more.

The doctor was sitting in his examination chair, slumped down like a man ready to relax. The pistol had dropped to the floor. The single bullet had punched through his brain, but neatly, the impact leaving the head tilted but his enormous glasses still fixed to his bald bloodied skull.

I stepped past Jones. The blood was dried hard, and the body was stiff and cool to the touch. But there wasn't any trace of rot, like there should have been. Not a whiff, not anything. It was like staring at a mummy in its earliest days. The face was smooth and simple, almost like a baby's, and the glasses were even thicker than I remembered, maybe six inches at their deepest. The doctor had lashed them to his head using a leather shoelace.

"This is kind of weird," I mentioned.

Jones made himself step inside. He stared at the corpse, and then he followed the dead man's gaze. Set up in the middle of the room was a big cheap mirror. "He must have been looking at himself...."

"Seems like," I agreed.

Then Jones looked at me, amazed and crazy. "But that's against the rules. Looking at your own soul is the surest way to go mad, he told me."

"Still," I said. "You can imagine the temptation."

Jones stood his ground, shaking hard. I didn't need special lenses to read his mind. Maybe before he knew what he was going to say, I knew. With a quiet sure voice, he told both of us, "I don't need this."

"You don't," I agreed.

"I have to get out of here," he whimpered.

So I led him back into the front of the Shoppe, and with half a nudge, I said, "Then go. Get out of here. I won't tell anybody about you. Go."

The last time I saw Jones, he was running hard for the exit. He didn't look back at me, not once. Nobody saw me wipe the place clean of prints and jam the back door shut again. And then, because it seemed like an exceptionally good idea, I took that crazy mess of lenses and metal for myself.

Years later, on occasion, I still throw on the magician's apparatus. As promised, it helps me read the souls of people, and particularly the young souls of pretty women.

For me, it's been no problem at all.

If my prescription changes, I just add another lens or two.

If there's a mirror in the room, I hang up a towel or just make myself look the other way.

What I figured out—and this comes after a lot of hard consideration—is that the good doctor got himself in trouble because he really cared about souls. What's inside another person was utterly fascinating to him, and of course he had to stare. But not me. Souls interest me only so long as they can help me, and most of them can't.

Really, I'm basically an amoral and increasingly old fart, and I know that already.

No need to stare at myself in shiny glass, thank you.