

ON WHAT IT MEANS WHEN A BLIND GIRL DRAWS TREES

By Ethan Fox

I

The dampening, heavy-set onslaught was cause for Sam to run to his car, and in one fluid motion, collapse into the driver-side seat. He stayed there, head slightly curled forward, as the car warmed up. He felt the melancholy numbness, a growing sense of claustrophobic dread with each bout of the windshield wiper.

Claudia ran through her ragged sketchbook with her hands. There was a defining weight to the pronounced ridges of the wax-crayon drawings. At a point, she stopped herself, as her hands were producing a lot of sweat and she didn't want to ruin the pages before her presentation. She gripped the sides of her chair, breathed in deeply, shaking her nerves into a calm stillness.

Just as the car was about to drive away, Quinn hurtled towards the passenger seat, ramming the back of his fist just below the window to get Sam's attention, and also to stop the car. The door opened in a combination of clicks, muffled darkly by the rain. And then the door was closed, and Quinn sat there dripping in the smooth-set vinyl seat.

"You alright?"

"I just thought... I need to go."

"I'm sorry."

Sam looked over at Quinn, and felt the heat of his cheekbones rise with a desperate, high-society authority. "Please stop. I don't need –" and then they were kissing passionately.

She heard footsteps approach her through the vibrations of the speaker on stage. They sounded like her mother's, and she turned her head, smiling. "I know you're going to do great out there," her mother's coldly-collected voice beacons her kindly.

"Please welcome to the stage, Claudia Crawford!"

Claudia grasped onto her mother's hand while she was guided out of the room to a wall-shaking applause. "I love you." She felt the warm kiss on her forehead, and walked out on stage, sketchbook in hand.

A day earlier, they couldn't keep their hands from touching, their mouths from kissing, their eyes from gazing longingly, lovingly into each other's souls. After work, they had entered Sam's house in a tangle, leaving a line of clothes behind them while the frosted-glass hallways lit up in front, sensing the presence of a human.

The sickly-warm heat beat against her forehead, and she felt her way to the podium. "Good evening. Thank you so much for inviting me to speak."

Claudia swallowed hard and continued on, forgetting half the words she had so carefully stored in her memory.

"I remember when I was seven we lived up on The Edge, and of course, all the rooms had hatches, so there was even more pressure for my parents to make sure I didn't open any of them, especially at such a young age. But like everyone at my age, I had that wild imagination, and one night when my parents were at the cinema, and the babysitter was asleep... Well, you know the rest. I don't think I need to tell you what happens."

Sam felt the warm floor beneath his feet as he drank creamy orange juice from a heavy-set glass. He smiled a sheepish line as Quinn pattered into the room, his hair dripping a bit from the shower. Quinn walked over and gave Sam a kiss, before getting a coffee.

"Do you think any of those calls were important?"

"It's after 5, of course not. You worry too much."

They had sat there in each other's company, finishing off their drinks in the darkening of the night.

"I entered into a bright world, sleek with glass things, fast objects, and noise. There was so much noise I thought how odd it was we didn't hear the noise. It was nothing like I was told; no ghastly creatures in an unbreathable smog. No desolation. I wandered around and got lost on a road that lead to a glass house. There was a man who found me and took me in for a day, gave

me food that appeared out of the walls, and a bed softer than a mother's love. All these things because I was lost."

Time had allowed them a moment in heaven, which they spent lavishly with no restraints. And now there was that paranoia, for at any moment the glass monitors could intrude. "Stop. I... Don't criminalize yourself."

Quinn sat back like a wet dog, rejected, and they sat there with tense numbness, unsure of what to say. After a time, Sam pulled out a small drive and connected it to his mind, downloading yesterday's blissful exploits.

"Here. Take this and remember me, will you? You can relive our moment in heaven over and over. As many times as you want."

"Sam..."

The man didn't believe me at first. He thought I was delusional, a child's mind dreams the silliest things. But he played along and took me to a place with a machine. And the machine could read my memories, and they saw where I came from; a hidden door in the middle of the forest."

"And we can dream."

"Sam..."

"We can hope."

"Sam..."

"Someday you'll be happy... free. Live; true to yourself with someone else. Someone better than me."

"They were curious about the door, afraid almost. They took samples of my skin and let me through the door. And when I entered this world again, I couldn't see. I had seen a light too bright. It was hard, at first. I had to learn everything again: how to walk, write, read. I was fortunate enough to have wax crayons, which allowed me to feel what I was drawing. I drew all of what I saw here."

"Sam!"

"What?"

"I love you. No one could ever replace you."

Claudia opened her sketch book to the applause of the audience. "I come here today to ask us all to reconsider our views of the hatches. Let us explore them, and see what can be brought into our world to better ourselves, for if what I saw was any indication of what we're missing out on, then we have a lot to learn, and a long way to go. Thank you."

"You should move on, sometime."

Sam had become stiff, staring unblinkingly ahead. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Quinn nod through a stream of tears.

"How fortunate we are that it's raining," and then the seat was empty and Sam was left an empty set of emotions. He closed his eyes and leaned back as the tears danced down his cheek. They were tears of the damned, a fatefully-heavy onslaught, that fell for minutes as he imagined what death would be like.

II

Claudia sat in exhilaration, pounding above the ground with adrenaline. Her mother danced up to her, for all Claudia could tell, glowing with pride.

"You were exceptional out there!"

"Thank you."

"They want to turn your pictures into a book now, you'll be famous!"

"Oh my god!" Claudia, trembling with excitement, reached out to grasp her mother's hand.

"You're going to be published!"

"What did they say about exploration?"

There was a sudden stillness that corroded the air in bubbly brown clumps. It lasted for too long, and Claudia knew that it lasted for too long, and yet she kept smiling blindly waiting.

"Claudia. It's time you grow up."

“What did you do?”

“I can’t play this game anymore, dear. You’re almost twenty-seven; it’s been twenty years.”

“Mum, I... You know what I say is true. You told me that you spent a day looking for me because you thought I’d run away!”

“No, Claudia,” her mother sighed in pain. “The truth is, you were fast asleep when we got home. I thought having a book published would help you finally get over this.”

Heated tears pulsed down her face as she sat there in embarrassment, alone in her sight. Out of the unbearable silence, she pushed through a meek sentence that she’d heard once: “How unfortunate it’s not raining.”

“I’m going to let you have a few moments to yourself,” her mother’s footsteps trod heavily away, and Claudia was left to her own thoughts. She sat there for a time, in melancholy numbness, a sense of claustrophobic dread with each heartbeat.

No, she stood up in a firm stance, renewed strength surging through her veins. She knew truth, she had seen it so vividly, and she was going to go back. Her cart was just a few doors down... Yet she spent a moment standing there in uncertainty wondering how to go about getting outside. Would her mother question her? What about the agents, or any of the fans that might be waiting for her outside?

No, she stirred up the stillness of the room and created a storm headed directly to the door. No one would stop her, she would not be hesitant. Claudia flung open the door, and she could have sworn the heated air inside crackled delightfully with the air-conditioned hallway.

“Claudia!” her mother.

“I’m going to clear my head.”

“Do you need –”

“No.” Her head held high, Claudia made it to the end of the hallway, and stepped out into the cool evening air and straight into her cart. She muttered an address to the driver, and the engine whirred away through the street. The wind brushed her hair back, making room for her heart to jump into her throat. This was certainly the most daring thing she’d ever done, and truly made her feel alive.

The driver stopped, and helped Claudia out of the door. Like a dream that comes too easy, she walked unchallenged through the front door of her old house to the surprise of the

family, now eating their dinner, and straight up the stairs to her old room, where she locked the door.

The hatch had been covered up with wallpaper, she felt. Using her nails, she pushed the wallpaper into the door seam to the breaking point, cutting the outline of the hatch. And when strips of wallpaper lay in defeat beneath her shoes, Claudia gave a good tug on the handle, and whiplashed her entire body back, and then forward, as the door gave way, and she stepped out into a wasteland.

A red haze polluted the horizon, with dust picking along the fringes of the ground. Claudia's tears evaporated in the heat and dehydration of the land, and the wind stung her eyes. She could see everything: the detailed patterns the dust created in an attempt to mimic the wind, the gradient of reds and browns of the land. And when she looked behind her, there was nothing but black darkness.

"Hello!?" her eyes strained themselves in the storm, searching for anything in the flat landscape. She stumbled forward, walking in the direction of the wind, shielding her eyes. Every so often, she'd call out into the emptiness, and each time she was answered with howling wind.

And then there was a voice in the dark, and a bright fluorescent light to beacon her in. "Hello!?" She started to jog toward the responding "Who's there!?"

An old man appeared in the horizon, still and grounded. Claudia waved her hands out and walked towards him. "Hello!?"

"What are you doing out here?" the man asked when she reached a conversational distance.

"I'm looking for..." and Claudia didn't know what she was looking for exactly. "Something." And they stood there, regarding each other as the wind tried to move them along.

"Follow me," the old man turned and walked off with a sauntering limp.

The house the old man took her to was exactly like the one she remembered in her previous experience. Glass, smooth floors and walls, heavy-set décor. Except now everything had been weathered by the constant sand particles beating around the air.

The man sat down at the table and poured two glasses of water. "Sit, drink. You should drink."

Claudia obliged whole-heartedly.

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Claudia. I’m-”

“Claudia!?” The old man looked startled, and peered at her intently, almost as if she were some angel sent from God.

“...Yes. I came to... well, I thought I had come to this place a long time ago, but I... it’s um...”

“Different,” the man scoffed in bitter resentment. “God, it’s been what... twenty years?”

“You... are you?”

“No. But everyone knows about you. We poured money into researching that door ever since you left. We studied your DNA. Some people created a religion out of your name.”

“Geez.”

“Yeah, you became quite the popular figure.”

“But then what happened? I don’t remember this place. When I came here first it was so interesting. Sleek, new, and exciting. It was the perfect place, really.”

“You thought our society was perfect?” The man’s face chiseled more lines into itself. He continued on a wire-thin voice, wavering to find a stable frequency. “I knew a man... once... And I loved him so... so very much... And they took him because he loved me... Because he was sick. We thought to love a person of the same sex was a disease... And with all our technology, all that wonderful logic... we ruined humanity. Ruined our ability to connect. No. We were so ingrained with technology we were hardly human.”

“And that’s what ruined this place?”

The man laughed in a barking rhythm. “No. Heavens no. Why, that was just one problem of society.”

“So then... what?”

“You know what that door is?”

“No.”

“It’s a door to somewhere that doesn’t exist. Someone created your world outside of this universe, and populated the entire area. You know how much power that takes? Once we figured out how much power and potential was in that door why... Well that was the start. And then more experimentation. And then someone thought it would be a great weapon; a defense against other countries. And they tried to make a bomb.”

“I see.”

“You’re better off where you came from. There’s nothing left here.”

“I can’t go back. I’m blind there, people made a mockery of me. See, we were told that all the hatches opened to a world full of desolation and death, so when I told them the wonders I’d seen, and the miracles...”

“Hatches?”

“Well there’s more than one hatch.”

“There’s only one unique hatch on this planet. We tried to find more, trust me.”

“So then where do the other hatches lead to?”

“It’s your world.”

They sat there in puzzlement for a time, drinking water in the angry beams of red streaming through the grime-coated windows.

“Why did you come back? Really?” the man asked.

“Because I thought that somehow if I could prove that I wasn’t lying, that I had actually been through a hatch and experienced something new, people would believe me instead of telling me to keep dreaming.”

“Well, you came a bit late.”

“What’s left?” Claudia asked.

“Ruins. Ruins and memories.” The man laughed, and this time it hurt Claudia’s ears. “We have so many memories, and they’re all fucking useless!”

“Memories? Why, we could rebuild a society on memories. If I could see them that then we could help you.”

“I’ve got one memory: just one. And it’s something you can’t recreate. Sure, you could rebuild replica houses, and replacement science... progress our society where it stopped. But you couldn’t ever recreate the heart, the people... And why would you? We were such horrid beings, trying to kill off any true emotion. At some point, society has got to let go and become history.”

“I’m still not sure I understand. How could you kill off emotion? Why did it make you such horrid beings?”

“Here.. Give me a moment.” He got up and disappeared for a moment, returning with a circular patch. “This is my most beautiful memory. I’ve... had to keep it secret because if they

knew... Well... I guess I hope that if I show you the beautiful thing, you'd understand. What the hell." And he placed it on her temple.

Claudia was crying at the end. "And this is what love looks like?. This is what it means to love?"

And the man wept silently.