

LOOKS ARE EVERYTHING

*A picture held us captive,
And we could not get outside it,
for it lay in our language,
and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.*--Ludwig Wittgenstein

Samantha is a sexy blind woman. She works at it. And I'm sure she would be happy to hear me say so. She had many affairs and sexual trysts before marrying, and she may be having them still when the opportunity presents itself. Which it does. I first met her at a national conference as a colleague. She did an interesting presentation about couples' therapy and, speaking with her afterwards I learned that she practiced in the area where I taught clinical psychology. We stayed in contact and, some time later, I invited her to supervise one of my graduate students. She accepted and after several months, I invited her to come speak to our seminar of therapists-in-training about her practice of sex therapy (yes, she has made a career of it). She would also talk about the early experiences that had led to her choosing this profession and why she was so good at it. Samantha had an excellent reputation for getting results in her work. Of course, the entire class was immediately fascinated and looked forward to meeting her. Hers promised to be a unique perspective and everyone was eager to hear about it. We were not to be disappointed. On the scheduled day and one full hour after the scheduled time, Samantha swept dramatically into the classroom alongside one bedraggled graduate student. Samantha had enlisted Lara's aid in helping her dress for the occasion and this turned out to be a long, involved process. Thus the hour delay. Samantha was eager to make just the right impression and announced flirtatiously to no one in particular that it was her prerogative as a woman to be late.

Poor Lara, the graduate student in question, appeared completely unraveled and on the verge of tears, knowing that the entire class had been kept waiting. Samantha, on the other hand, was cool and in command. She immediately demanded and got the attention of the entire room, and she began speaking without waiting to be introduced by me or by Lara. We all struggled to regain our balance, although I'm not

sure that anyone accomplished that for more than a moment during the course of Samantha's visit. I know I tried to regain control of my class with only moderate success. Samantha has been blind since birth, as the result of having spent her first days in an incubator, a tragic circumstance that blinded so many premature babies until the cause of this misfortune—high oxygen levels—was discovered in the mid-1950's. Despite her lack of sight, Alexandra has managed to learn the special skill that certain women have in making a grand entrance. Although she couldn't see them, all eyes immediately turned toward her in any room she entered. She not only knew this, she reveled in it. Hers is a kind of "in-your-face" refusal to be made to feel inferior to sighted women. Samantha is forty-two years old; her skin is one of the colors that society names white, her sexual relationships of the nature that it names heterosexual. She is tall and slender with long light brown hair. On the day she came to class, she was dressed in a chic reproduction of a peasant blouse and skirt, one that no peasant could afford. In the course of the classroom conversation, she let us know that people consider her attractive and often make a special point of telling her that she is extremely good looking "for a blind person." You can see her pride when she says this. She revels in her own mastery of the sighted world and its definition of female attractiveness. She is exceptional. Samantha has been married for several years to a sighted man, also an accomplishment in her world. She has snagged top honors in the mating game. She was about to demonstrate to our class almost everything about femininity and gender that we had discussed in earlier classes and that all the women in the room already knew in our bones. Her way of learning it was so much more conscious and deliberate than that of any of the sighted women in the room that it was a bit startling at first. I think it is safe to say that, by the end of the class, the women in the room felt more similar to her than they did different. Although she has never seen herself or another woman, Samantha has mastered the art of femininity. Gender really matters to her. It is clear she is a sexy woman first, a sexy blind person second. How does Samantha accomplish this feat? She leads with her sexuality and with a flirtatious charm. Unlike Isabel, she does not wait to be approached, but puts herself right out on display for everyone to see and admire. It is a kind of pre-emptive strike. Also unlike Isabel, who strives to become invisible,

Samantha makes sure that she is the center of attention in any room that she enters, as visible as possible. One strong influence, she reports, is that she grew up, like many other girls of her generation, reading *Seventeen* magazine, the Braille version of course. Just as Jesse had access to *Playboy* as a kind of training manual in becoming a man, Samantha studied the pages of *Seventeen* to learn to be a girl and then a woman.

As the pages of *Seventeen* told her, a woman adorned herself until her appearance was as stunning as the first flower of springtime. A man had only to look at her with appreciation and desire, to decide whether or not to pluck this flower in full bloom. For them both, this was the basis of the gender contract. And it is one aspect of the sighted gender contract with which these blind men and women struggle to comply. They are both playing a game of blind man's bluff, a game that requires additional team members to help them play it well. Jesse has his visual memories, Samantha her teachers and friends. Both have the written media and auditory versions of the visual media to give them the necessary prescription. Samantha had an additional nudge.

She was raised in an Irish Catholic family with three brothers, three sisters, and two mightily overworked parents. These pious people readily accepted her blindness as "the will of God." They lived in an Irish Catholic working class community in a small New England city, where there was an entire culture built around the church. This included celebrating holidays and religious festivals together, sending the children to the church schools, and holding the priests and nuns, many of whom were from their own families, in high reverence as servants of God. In these schools, the little Catholic girls were taught to be pure and virtuous, to yield to the teachings of the clergy, and, most important, to safeguard their precious virginity for marriage and procreation. That is the formal teaching. There is an informal one that is much fiercer and that the world has been horrified to learn about, except for those fathers of the church who knew all along and kept this dirty secret to themselves. Samantha's parents dutifully sent her to these religious schools and the family attended mass every Sunday. In fact, it was their one outing together in a demanding work-filled week. There all the children of the local families were baptized and confirmed. In later years, most of them either married each other or God at the very same altar. It was a

holy sanctuary in otherwise busy, secular lives. In that supposed sanctuary, Samantha underwent another ritual of baptism into holy femininity. She was sexually molested by her priest when she was seven years old. It continued after classes for several years, this violation of the holy sanctuary of her body and soul. Sadly, so many girls and boys undergo this cruel initiation ritual that it seems almost as ubiquitous as the official kind of baptism. How do they come to understand this violation by those whom they have been taught to trust as much as God himself? There are a variety of unsatisfactory ways to compromise with reality. Many use their bodies rather than their minds or hearts to make sense of this otherwise senseless experience. They hide their conclusions from no one but perhaps themselves. Some become asexual, but many more become hypersexual, and the females become what most of us would consider to be hyper-feminine. This version of femininity carries within itself the wound to itself. These girls and women lead with their sexuality, almost as if the process of initiation confers on them a certain power over men rather than the opposite. Many can even describe this distorted sense of power. Such a sexualized approach is almost a sure sign of an early violation. It is a child's solution to an adult problem. Such women learn to equate their value and power in any relationship with their command of sexuality. They have learned their lessons well and keep repeating them as another child would the multiplication tables, believing that their sexuality gives them a magical "after the fact" power, as if they were actually in charge of their own molestation.

Samantha did not say any of this to us. She only enacted it. Yet, in my many years of practicing psychotherapy, I have had this discussion or seen it performed without words too many times not to recognize it. What Samantha did say, however, in the course of the classroom discussion, was that she connects danger with attractiveness. This requires no nuanced psychological interpretation. It is just too obvious and too bad. Early experiences of violation are always formative and people make sense of them in a finite number of ways. Samantha's is not atypical. Among women who organize their lives around sexuality, many have been molested, raped, or otherwise sexually traumatized. Their behavior is a failed attempt at mastery through enactment and it serves to keep the injury alive just as it keeps it out of awareness.

Samantha's history led her to focus on mastering "sexiness" and not worrying so much about blindness. The blindness made it just that much more complicated, but was only a modifier in her quest to be "sexy."

Samantha herself said nothing more than that she found scents like men's colognes and shaving cream stimulating. It does not take a psychologist to guess where she first smelled these. I wish that it were a rare enough occurrence that it did require some digging and interpretation, but it is so common as to be almost obvious. Of course, I did not choose to pursue the subject in front of the class that day. I was not sure that Samantha would feel free to say "No" if I asked her permission first, not sure if she knew how to say "No" in such a circumstance. And I could not judge her feelings by noting a flicker in her eyes or a nuanced expression move across her face. Nor could she judge my intentions in that same way. I decided to leave it to Samantha what she did and did not reveal to us.

What she decided to discuss next easily captured everyone's interest for the rest of the class session. She offered us a detailed description of the fine-tuning of blind femininity. Samantha had decided to protect her parents from the knowledge of what had happened to her on the church altar. She could clearly see what she could not literally see, how overburdened they already were, and decided to bear her cross herself. Silent, but not passive, she began to plan her own destiny in this world with the tools that she had been given. She asked her parents to send her to charm school for blind girls. I don't know how she found out about such schools, but they are apparently not uncommon. I have heard tales of this kind of finishing school from sighted women. They are the slow learners, requiring a special school and a major in feminine charm. At charm school Samantha would learn that there was a special way for a girl to walk and sit, to move and speak. This is exactly what she wanted to know. She practiced walking with a book on her head so she would stand up straight and not "bounce around." Samantha's mother had complained that she walked "like a football player," but of course Samantha had never seen a football game and had no idea what this meant. Why shouldn't she walk in a way that felt free and happy, swinging her arms and bouncing up and down? Her mother explained as best she could that girls were supposed to walk and move differently from boys. What felt natural and easy to

her was the boys' way. To become a woman took more study and more work. It did not come naturally.

I remember that when I was about six years old my mother sent me to ballet classes to learn to be more graceful. As I was an excellent athlete, I wondered for many years what she meant. And I probably never did learn to master what she considered to be grace. I both could not and would not. My body would not perform a tour jette nor would my mind permit it. Nevertheless, I performed my own version of these tortuous movements on the stage in the annual ballet school recital. It gave me no sense of power or control. I must admit that I enjoyed the attention, but not what I had to do to get it. It was just not my way. Samantha could not afford to be too much of a rebel and instead chose her own route. In her determination to be accepted in the sighted world, she practiced and learned the skills that sighted girls and women breathe in every minute of every day. She learned to stand up straight, to walk gracefully with smaller steps, more like a ballet dancer than a football player, and, most important of all, to sit with her legs together. This was a must. She was learning both to contain and display herself and to take up less space. She was becoming a woman.

"I didn't have anything to mirror, so I had to be told and then shown," she tells us with a certain degree of satisfaction in learning her lessons so well. She knows now how to hold herself in a closed up position, occupying as little space as possible and presumably taking responsibility for her own safety, as this posture is supposed to indicate that "she is not asking for it." Despite these efforts, she was acquaintance raped once and able to "talk her way out" of three other attempted rapes. She describes some of these situations to us in detail. Most took place in her apartment when she was somehow alone with a man who was a friend or a casual date, but who decided to end the evening by forcing himself on her. Each time, she was able to fight back or talk her way out of the situation. Is this number of close calls higher than that of the average heterosexual woman? Would a man inclined to sexual aggression consider a blind woman an easier target? Is Samantha confused about what visual messages to send? It's hard to know without being there in her bedroom. In any case, she is no way complicit in her own violation as a result of her blindness, as she is still

able to say “No.” She herself believes that her attractiveness is at the root of this endangerment. She is irresistible in some mysterious, yet satisfying way.

Her opinion engenders a long discussion in the class about whether or not unattractive women get hassled or attacked by men. Opinions vary. I do not have to tell you Samantha’s position. Yet in reality, all kinds and degrees of attractiveness do not protect girls and women from violation. Eighty-year-old women in nursing homes are raped by staff members, as are six-month-old babies, sometimes by their own fathers. Bosnian women are raped by Serbian soldiers and then again by the United Nations “peacekeepers (Sharratt, S., 2011).” I will not continue with these examples. They are all too numerous. By now we know all too well that this form of assault has nothing to do with attraction or attractiveness. It is a form of violence unique only for the particular assault weapon and, if it is provoked at all, it is simply by the act of walking around in a woman’s body. For Samantha, it is a sort of cold comfort.

In charm school, Samantha learned about makeup. Apparently, according to her, using makeup is growing more and more common among women in the blind community. By this time, I had become used to blind people, women and men, not wearing dark glasses or shielding the sighted world from their sometimes quite distorted eyes. In the beginning, it was difficult for me to look at them, as I tend to be squeamish. But I must admit that defining and outlining blind female eyes was hard for me to fathom. Would it make her more attractive to a sighted man? Would it make her look more like a sighted woman? How could she learn to master this dubious art? Samantha was happy to explain herself. She prepares to go out with the help of a sighted female friend. The preparation begins in her clothes closet, where they put together an outfit. It then moves on to the choice of hairstyle, and finally makeup, which is applied by this friend. Shoes are very important. Back when she was in school, some of the other girls took on this responsibility. They told her that her mother was dressing her differently and that she should change from bobby sox and loafers to nylons and heels. Of course, she did. Samantha has always wanted nothing more than to fit in. Lara tells the class that Samantha has asked her to serve in this role several times. She did so reluctantly. And why was she reluctant? Not because she considered any of this costuming odd. In fact, it made perfect sense to her,

as she was also a woman who took great care with her appearance. She was reluctant because she took all this so seriously that she felt uneasy assuming responsibility for “the look” of another woman. She was afraid that she might fail Lynette and let her own “look” intrude. She did not question the necessity of “the look,” nor did Samantha.

Lara also told the class about an incident that had caused her severe discomfort and embarrassment. We all had to laugh when she was finished, although she was dead serious. Once Lara came to Samantha’s house after dark to pick her up for a shopping trip to the local mall. The door was unlocked, but no one answered, so, after several knocks, she opened the door, walked in, and began to look around for Samantha. After a few minutes of walking through the living room and hallway, she found Samantha in her closet with a blind friend, choosing an outfit to wear. They were doing this with the help of an elaborate system of Braille labels and tags. The tags, attached to each piece of clothing, described the item and indicated what other items it could be worn with. Lara had actually helped Samantha set up this system.

There the two blind women stood completely in the dark discussing the colors, trim, and design details of the clothes in the closet. Samantha obviously had forgotten to turn on the lights in the closet or anywhere else in her house, so engrossed was she in her task. And why should she remember? For the sake of the sighted people around her, of course. How else would any of them even know that she was at home? How could Lara find her? The only apparent handicap in that situation was Lara’s need for illumination. Yet even Samantha’s neighbors had complained about the house being dark all the time. They thought it might attract burglars. The house itself was “asking for it.” Of course, the whole episode gives new meaning to “coming out of the closet.” Later when I visit other blind people, I will find paintings or photographs hanging on the walls of their rooms for similar reasons. At least, this is what they tell me. “These pictures are for the comfort of the sighted people who visit me.” Some of them go on to insist that they themselves like and can appreciate the pictures. When another blind woman, Andrea, claimed that she knew what each one depicted, I asked her to give me “the tour.” She turned out to be wrong about every

picture, just as Isabel had been wrong about the color of her house. I didn't challenge Andrea any more than I had Isabel. I didn't want to destroy her dignity, but my question had been answered. However, I am not sure that she really appreciated my question and would not have preferred a simple compliment about how nicely she had decorated her home. She had put so much effort into passing that my questions may have struck her as embarrassing and impertinent. I was the one who did not fit in.

Andrea is a blind woman who was very cordial to me, but after a few visits she called to say that she did not want to continue meeting. I was disappointed, of course, but could not convince her otherwise. In fact, Andrea was Jesse's girlfriend. She told me this as soon as I met her, although he had only called her a friend. She was the first blind person who invited me to her home, and I was fascinated. Her apartment was simply and comfortably furnished, as it turned out, by her mother. She lived alone and cooked, cleaned, and took care of herself, although she did not have a job. Twice a week she cooked dinner for Jesse, and he spent the night. Once in a while, he cooked, but he didn't like her to come over to his apartment, which he said was "too messy." He had never permitted me inside either for the same reason, which he always insisted was a function of his gender and not his blindness. Jesse liked to save face. I visited Andrea two or three times at her home. She preferred to meet there and not outside. On one of those visits she took me into the kitchen to show me how she prepared a meal. All items in the refrigerator and pantry were labeled in Braille. When it came to measuring and combining ingredients, she would place the index finger of her left hand inside the bowl or measuring cup to indicate when she had poured in enough of the item. As I got to know more blind people, I was treated to this demonstration many times.

I must admit that I am a bit fanatic about germs and often check to see if people wash their hands if they are cooking for me. I didn't come by this quirk naturally, but as a result of a long illness that has affected my immune system. Yet I wear it now like a glove. Not all of my blind hosts washed their hands, but no one ever actually cooked for me, so we were both saved the embarrassment of my unvoiced request.

There was always a sort of tension between Andrea and me. I couldn't get us

beyond it, although I tried. Soon enough Jesse reported to me that they had broken up and, at about the same time, Andrea also severed her relationship with me. Jesse and I continued to be friends. I can only imagine that I contributed to a problem between them or at least somehow got caught up in it. Andrea always thought of me as Jesse's friend and maybe she wanted a clean break. Maybe she was jealous of our friendship. Maybe she just met someone else. I never did find out.

Samantha, of course, lives with a sighted man and has sighted clients who come to her therapy office, so she too has artwork on the walls. She especially likes seascapes, forest scenes, and sunsets; she is sure that she can "feel their energy" and so does not have to see them. This is an explanation that can easily pass muster where she and I live, in Northern California. In fact, there do seem to be certain intuitive persons who can, without seeing them, feel the energies of objects. This is not as strange as it sounds, since what appears to the human eye to be an object is more accurately an amalgam of electro-magnetic waves. It is, after all, only our human sensory systems that organize our world into discrete and identifiable objects. But this kind of acute perception is not a common skill or, at least, not commonly developed, even among the blind. When it does emerge, it is often the byproduct of years of spiritual or consciousness practice (Pearle, E.S., 2013).

This extraordinary skill is rare enough to have been studied in controlled settings by psychologists and parapsychologists. I have tested my own hunch by asking most of the blind people I know to describe colors or "the feeling" of a painting. As I had anticipated, not one of them could do so with any more accuracy than I can with my eyes closed. Many of them are annoyed by this stereotype of blind sensitivity. However, most blind people do try to develop their other senses as much as possible. Anyone would in this circumstance. But as far as being conferred extraordinary perceptual abilities, I think not.

I have left out a lot of Samantha's sexual adventures, which I want to describe in a little more detail. Not surprisingly, she has had several affairs outside her marriage. She is happy to talk about them, but does not mention whether she and her husband have an openly acknowledged agreement about this issue or not. And no one asks. From what I know of her though, I would guess not, if for no other reason than

that such openness would surely remove the stimulation of the danger involved.

Samantha recounts the details of one of these affairs, albeit a failed one. She was at a conference for blind people and met a man who interested her. It was apparently mutual. In the course of being together during the day, they decided upon an early evening rendezvous in Samantha's room. They agreed to meet at the hotel elevator at seven that evening, when the formally scheduled events of the day were over. Samantha waited and waited for him by the elevators, but he did not arrive--or so it seemed. She felt disappointed, hurt, and humiliated. When she questioned him the next day, he had the same reactions. It seemed that he had been there and that she was the one who had stood him up.

There turned out to be an explanation that solved this mystery. After agitated discussion, they both realized that there were two banks of elevators in the hotel lobby. While he was standing at one waiting for her, she was in front of the other waiting for him. Although they stood for an entire half hour only a few feet apart, neither one had any way of knowing that the other was right there. No other sense helped them find each other. So much for the scientifically touted role of scent and pheromones in attraction. Of course, this one unplanned incident proves little or nothing theoretically. Its poignancy may be its primary feature. One more issue that Samantha discussed with us that day in class struck me as humorous and, at the same time, also poignant. It's not something I would have thought of until she brought it up: the difficulty for a blind woman of having a menstrual period. She relies on her sighted husband to check her clothing before she leaves the house. During the rest of the day, she must rely on herself and not always successfully. When Jesse had a large spot on the front of his shirt one day, I certainly thought about the issue of cleanliness as the sighted world defines it. It is impossible for blind people to know if their clothing is spotted, if the ketchup from lunch is on their shirt or on their face, if something is in their hair or nose. Never mind the more subtle spinach between their teeth after eating a salad. But blood on the back of a skirt seems to me to be the ultimate challenge. I suppose that blind women could choose to wear red or all black on "those days." I suppose that their way of checking without the help of a sighted friend or partner would be similar to their cooking methods. Yet why care at all but

for the sight of the sighted? I have had the opportunity to meet with Samantha another time away from the class. There is a new library in San Francisco serving the disabled community and she wants to check it out, in particular their collection of audiotapes. I tell Lara that I will take her there. I want the opportunity to spend some time alone with her. When she tells me that she will meet me there, I do not insist upon picking her up. Samantha has her own ways of traveling. We meet in the lobby at an appointed time and she arrived with her recently acquired guide dog, Maxi. Not only does Maxi make life easier for Samantha, but he draws more attention and comments her way. Samantha revels in this attention. The three of us head for the elevator that will take us to the room we want to find. The rooms are labeled in Braille for her and with clearly written signs for me. Both of our immediate needs are met. The library itself will not be as easy to navigate, as they attempt to serve all the officially designated disabilities in the same set of rooms. Samantha is in search of books-on-tape. This is several years before iPods and other such devices; all these readings can now easily be downloaded on a home computer. This was still the Dark Ages of the 1990's. We approach the librarian for help. It turns out that this young man is deaf. He can sign, but I do not understand this language. Certainly Samantha cannot. The deaf and the blind inhabit separate universes.

To accommodate us, he picks up a pen and paper and begins to write down his instructions and comments. The only communication possible between Samantha and him must go through me; I must use my visual and auditory senses to pass information back and forth. He writes his comments to me and I speak them to Alexandra. Then she gives me her responses or asks other questions, which I write down and pass to him. It is my own hearing and sight that permit me to serve as intermediary, as the medium for their messages. I am once again a translator, trying to perch on two different sensory maps at the same time. Normally these maps work in tandem, in complete harmony for me. Tearing them one from another leaves me as shaken as if the rending were literal, as if someone had reached into my brain and disentangled the neuronal pathways. To separate what I have always known together is much more difficult than I could have imagined.

Samantha also feels the tension of the situation and clearly resents the need for my help. As we leave, she begins talking about this tension somewhat obliquely, referring to people who do not speak English and the impediment and difficulties that causes her. They are a problem and she is just a regular American. It is clearly from her personal sense of bewilderment that she speaks this way. Had she been sighted, she would have been one to learn a bit of these languages and to champion their very diversity. Without sight, she already has enough translation to do in the course of an ordinary day. And Samantha does not like to be reminded of what she cannot do.

She and I talk a little more this same afternoon about gender expectations. Samantha has thought about this issue a lot and is very interested in feminism. She believes, as most of us who have thought about it do, that gender expectations are taught every day by the media. "It takes blind people longer to learn them, but we do." Although interested in the gender expectations that feminism has brought to the fore in recent decades, Samantha is equally proud to be able to grasp and conform to these expectations. It is her own brand of feminism, I suppose, and the alternative to being an outsider. In her mind, she does not miss the mark. Without even seeing where she is going, she is able to get there.

Of course, Samantha is not aware of the hundreds of visually based calibrations that each sighted person makes in response to eye contact, facial expressions, or body language. She cannot know how much even a single glance or gesture can convey in its detail or timing. The effects on another person of a slightly raised eyebrow or a completely raised one are almost too complex to put into words. And yet this is precisely what I have tried to do with each of these blind people. The truth is that only by trying and failing over and over did I come to this knowledge. Isabel has no more idea of the colors of a sunset than before I tried to describe one to her, and Samantha is just as unknowing about the myriad subtle and not so subtle glances of lovers.

Samantha's repertoire of gestures is limited to what she can commit to memory; she is not a native speaker of sighted language nor is she fluent in it, no matter her seeming mastery of at least one important aspect. Instead she, like the other blind people I already know, is a lifelong student of the sighted relationship. If

that is so, then I myself am a captive of that same practice. As much as I try to develop these relationships and to be sensitive to the different perspective, I cannot find a way to breach the gap between us. "What do I mean by this?" I ask myself.

The mirror does not reflect. As much as I try not to, I am looking for feedback in the eyes and on the faces of blind people. Do they like me? Are we connecting? Am I understanding? Are they understanding me? And I cannot find the answers anywhere I look. Where am I when I am with Samantha or Jesse, Andrea or Isabel? I am unmoored in some very disturbing fashion. I am disoriented in a way that none of them seems to be.

I am coming to realize that vision is crucial to my own understanding of each of them and myself in relationship to them, but it is absent and unavailable. I find that I feel lonely. As much as I was initially relieved getting to know Jesse when I realized that I didn't have to meet the demands for eye contact of an ordinary sighted conversation conducted across a cafe table, I was beginning to miss the unspoken and nuanced intimacy of the very same act. And I was coming to understand how much I depend upon visual cues to know where I stand with another person.

Even more unexpectedly, I was feeling psychologically clumsy. I could not get my bearings. There were too long silences or interruptions in our conversations. There were my tension-reducing attempts at humor that would be taken literally and would thus wind up increasing tension. Nobody could see that I was smiling or perhaps had a slightly raised eyebrow. And I began to notice more and more, as I searched for the customary cues upon which I, a sighted person, depend, that the subtle details of facial expression and gesture were also missing. Although experts in non-verbal communication hold that facial expression of emotion is consistent and universal, I was not finding this to be the case. It is not that these blind people had a different set of facial expressions, but that they had none in circumstances where I expected them. Better said, their non-verbal expressions and gestures were reduced to the broad and the basic. They were not really serving as interpersonal calibrators except in the most general sense. These blind people undoubtedly were accustomed to this absence and perhaps could not even fathom what was not there and had never been there for them. I, on the other hand, felt a certain conversational vertigo; this

was an entirely new experience for me. An entire language, crucial to me, was not being spoken. Without that language, where was I? And more importantly, who was I? Clearly not the same person I was in the sighted world. I was awkward in areas that I usually was not, confused about things I could generally see clearly, and a partial stranger to myself. This I had not expected.

It was I who was, more than they, in the dark, as the expression goes. Only those of us who know light, after all, can experience its absence. Although the sighted tend to imagine the non-sighted as being in the dark, that very image is based in knowing light. The blind reside in a zone where neither light nor dark exists. They can only sometimes extrapolate very broadly from their access to the other senses that remain intact. None of us who is sighted can imagine their world fully, and I was coming to understand that neither could they really understand ours.

For Samantha in particular, and blind people in general, vision must be imagined. For them, it is achingly central and does not exist at the very same time. As I try to master this incompatible duality, their map is little more for me than a huge blind spot. For Samantha and the others I have so far come to know, the map is one of extrapolated meanings and ideas, guesses and hypotheses. It is not informed by sight, but by a combination of other senses, hearsay, and what I had come to know as the process of passing. It was a different map in this combination than I had ever encountered before.

Yet is this so different from my own sighted maps? I still wondered. The most important concepts that Samantha uses to organize her life seem to involve gender, femininity, and sexuality. These matter most to her, no great wonder. The precise framework that she has created goes something like this. "Being a desirable woman is much more significant than being blind. I can be as desirable as any other woman and I can be in control of sexualized relationships. In this way, being blind comes to matter less." It is not a bad strategy, given the tools she has.

Within this dance of gender and sexuality, blindness and danger, Samantha finds the part of the blind man to be even more difficult than her own. She herself is better off, she rationalizes. "Sight equals power for men," says Samantha, without explicitly saying "Sex equals power for women." She has said it in every way except

with words. She has a close friend named Luke, whom I will meet very soon. He is also blind and is a computer expert. He specializes in instructing other blind people in the technology--and there is an ever-increasing amount of it--designed to extend their intact senses prosthetically. Samantha and Luke have an ongoing dialogue about blindness and how it affects masculinity and femininity. They both feel that being blind is, in general, harder for men than for women. "Blind men are stripped of what it means to be a male, to be able to establish eye contact, to flirt, to pour a glass of wine." Samantha is truly Samantha, even in this circumstance thinking first and foremost about sexual encounter as the defining element of gender. Yet I too have come to realize how important flirtation is for most beginning sexual relationships and nearly impossible without the complex language of the eyes. Of course it is possible just to say flat out, "I am attracted to you. What shall we do about it?" This does not compare with the subtlety of the dance of pursuit. It lacks the building tension that is so much a part of the early pleasure in this kind of relationship. Or at least, anticipation of the moments of its release fuel the exchange. The glance. Looking away. More boldly making eye contact. Not looking away. All these moves becoming more and more highly charged as they continue and are reciprocated. Luke and Samantha can never know the pleasure of this sort of interplay that engages the heart of desire. If they replace it, there is no way for them to tell me or seemingly for me to know from my vantage point outside the experience. I suppose that I could have begun a sexual relationship with a blind person, but that might have been going just a little too far for the sake of research.

However, I did ask Samantha one more bold question about sexuality because it intruded itself in my thoughts impertinently. I will eventually ask other blind people and get a variety of interesting answers. I want to know if sexual intercourse was surprising the first time, since she did not have the overwhelming visual bombardment of imagery that has grown so common in contemporary visual societies, where every manner of sexuality is visible on the Internet, in film, and even more uninvited in its unsolicited use to engage our attention sufficiently to sell a previously unrelated product--a car or a coat or dishwashing detergent. Did Samantha know what to expect of sex, what went where and how, not having seen it first? I am

asking now about the simple mechanics of the act, the “Insert part A into part B” of sexual intercourse. I catch her a bit off guard. She does not seem to know about the sexual images all around us, selling not just sex itself, but cars, toothpaste, and ultimately a sense of self. Samantha pauses and thinks for a moment or two, then gamely begins to describe her first time to me. In fact, she says that it took several times until she got used to the details of anatomy for which she had not been prepared visually. She means that she did not really know about male erections or the precise mechanics of intercourse, the what-goes- where and how of it. She covered her inexperience by pretending to be prepared. Her strategy was and is to try to pass, "faking it" in a way completely different and entirely identical to that of many sighted women. It is a human strategy that perhaps comes in the package known as language. Perhaps the lie is born with the ability to speak, especially to oneself, and that is why the non-verbal is so important to the understanding of meaning and even truth. Words can deceive in a way that actions often cannot.

By the time I meet Samantha, I have already seen several different blind performances of passing in the sighted world. Samantha 's unique contribution to my growing understanding was probably to demonstrate the precise details of flirting and of sexuality and how to approximate these skills for a sighted audience. Of course, her blind performance is a bit stilted, lacking the spontaneity and fine-tuning of visual exchange, the ongoing conversation known as body language and eye contact. She is less interpersonally reactive. Her communication is based, to a greater extent than for sighted women, in memorizing her lines like the lead character in a play. In each circumstance, she gives the same repeat performance that she learned in rehearsal. It is stripped of calibration and context, but perhaps not of desire. And it is quite recognizable to the sighted. Samantha had to commit to memory the details of gender as young children memorize the multiplication tables or as she herself has learned what clothing goes with what. The mirror does not reflect; no image stares back at her. Nevertheless, she is ensnared in the cat's cradle of vision. With the assistance of the written and visual media, the translation of sighted individuals, and the acts, both ordinary and obscene, of sighted men and women, Samantha has acquired access to the encrypted codes of gender. The performance remains a bit awkward, but is

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