

**Third Place
Grades Eleven /Twelve**

Sadie's Eyes

by Vanessa Decker

“Have you ever read *The Sea Gull*, Dr. Bennett?”

“No, unfortunately, I have not. Why?”

“The plot of the play is this: ‘a young girl lives all her life beside a lake; she loves the lake like a sea gull, and, like a sea gull, is happy and free. A man comes along by chance, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her.’”

“That was lovely. I imagine that in this case, you are the sea gull.”

“Actually, Dr. Bennett, on this particular occasion, the sea gull is you.”

Dr. Bennett cleared his throat. “Have a seat, if you would.”

Bennett’s stomach protruded over the lip of his desk as he leaned forward. He licked his thumb and rubbed it along the edge of his glasses; however, the substance that was plastered to them remained impervious to his efforts. He sighed, placed them on the bridge of his nose, and studied his subject all the same. The patient before him was much younger than those he typically encountered, and yet in the girl’s features he could detect a secret wisdom, conveyed by the flicker of an eyelid or the twitch of a lip. He smiled slightly and reviewed the girl’s hospital admission. She was twelve and called herself Sadie. She had been diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder, anti-social personality disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder by three previous psychiatrists. Given was an excerpt from a journal that she used to keep, and Bennett quickly scanned it:

“People say that I frighten them sometimes. They say that there’s something funny about my eyes; they never correspond with what I’m doing. They say that perhaps it’s like I’m watching something carefully, something that no one else can see. I think they’re trying to be mean, but I don’t mind. It sets me apart from the others, as though I possess a quality that none of them have or can understand. I am a different animal than the others, but I mustn’t tell lest anyone tries to turn me into what the others are. I draw in blood. The only way to guarantee attention and affection is through catastrophe.”

He glanced up at the child then, whose eyes keenly studied a tiny fleck of down that ascended across his desk. In an instant, they flickered to meet his own. Sadie's eyes seemed unreasonably large and luminous; they were very beautiful, edged by thick, dark lashes. Their initial impression was one of great brilliance. It was only after a moment of observation that Bennett was able to discern a problem.

To begin, the irises were yellow. They were so large that there was barely a white back round to frame them, and they moved much too quickly for their size. They darted across everything, absorbing and understanding, piercing the air with tiny, pinpoint pupils, small and slender enough to resemble those of a snake.

The ovular pupils bore into Dr. Bennett's until his hand nervously edged up to wipe away the beads of perspiration that had collected along his receding hairline. Only then, seemingly triggered by this display of discomfort, did the girl smile slightly.

Bennett blinked and adjusted himself in his chair. He hadn't felt so nervous since his first appointment with a patient. It was absurd to feel this way now, after nearly twenty-eight years of practice.

He smiled, more affectionately this time, and yet he couldn't look her in the eyes, he feared, ever again. He cleared his throat.

"So tell me... Sadie, is it? What brings us together today?"

"I play with blood." She said flatly.

"I see." Said Dr. Bennett, jotting down a note not on what she said but how she said it. He scanned the report. "So it seems. Would you like to tell me about it? When did this start?"

"I've always played with dead things." Her pupils contracted. "I don't know why everyone despises it so. I'm not hurting anyone."

"Have you thought, perhaps, that you're hurting your family?"

"No. I'm not getting my blood from them."

Dr. Bennett winced. "You've been painting... you make paintings in blood."

A dark photocopy had been included in her report. It was a lake at a red sunrise. "This is beautiful work. Is this, by chance, the lake from *'The Sea Gull'*?"

Sadie's lip twitched. "She loves the lake. She is happy and free, like a sea gull..."

“How is it that you acquire such quantities to paint with?” Dr. Bennett continued.

“I’m twelve.” Replied the girl. “I receive a forth of a cup of it every month from nature. I cover my hands with it.”

Bennett chose, for the time being, to overlook this confession. “I see. And what do you feel when you do this?”

“I look into the mirror and pretend that I’ve just been caught doing something dreadful.”

“And it’s the surprise that you enjoy, then? Perhaps you like to be shocked by your own abilities? It says here that you’ve had a history with decorative make-up. Would you like to tell me about that?”

“I have face paints in my bathroom. Blue and red, mixed, with a green lining makes a good bruise. I can draw one on if I need to escape from something by pretending that I’m hurt.”

“That’s very clever.”

The girl’s candor was so overwhelming that it led Dr. Bennett to suspect that there were many things being concealed from him.

Bennett swallowed.

“You said ‘affection stems from catastrophe.’ Perhaps you believe that these dramatic shows are the only legitimate way to merit affection. You think yourself unworthy of love in the absence of danger.”

“That’s very clever.” Sadie mimicked. Her voice was soft. “I had never so much as imagined that.”

There was a patronizing quality to her voice that deeply unnerved Bennett. There was a wall between the girl and him, more impenetrable than any he had ever encountered. It was his profession to access and unravel the strange inner workings of the people who walked into his office, to soothe and disarm them, and then piece them back together in the configuration in which they were meant to be born. This was his job; he had done it countless times, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to so much as look into this child’s serpent eyes.

She made him feel stupid, like a child who loudly announces a conclusion that everyone else arrived at long ago. She mocked him, and she did not believe in his abilities. He questioned her right to make him question himself. He was angry because he had no reason to be; she had made no

attempt to pique him, and yet he felt that his practice, the one thing in which he prided himself, was under siege.

After two hours, he claimed to know nothing about her except this: she was hiding something from him. At twelve, girls were supposed to think about fashion and famous actors, and this girl painted blood lakes.

He wrote, feigning condescension to mask his fear:

“The situation is a bit humorous, really. There’s nothing sincere in the least about her ‘blood performances.’ I believe them to be strictly for show; she has found the most disturbing and upsetting ritual she could and unleashed it upon everyone, trying to incite any kind of emotion or affection. The only truly unnerving thing about the child is her ability to act. She reads us, it seems, all of us, she knows what we want and yet there is an element of comedy to it all... very clever, frightening potential...”

He glanced up at the girl again and added:

“It seems she was correct. There is something lurking beneath those enormous irises... they are like curtains, trying to conceal a monster within...”

It was at this point that Bennett’s pen failed and with a slow swallow, he wiped the ink from his thumb.

The clock chimed twice, and abruptly Sadie stood. Her face was of an angel and her eyes of a bird. A bird of prey, in this particular case, Dr. Bennett reasoned.

“Thank you for your time, Doctor. Unless I am much mistaken, we will get along very nicely.”

She smiled then and her irises enlarged again, swelling to fill her eye sockets, squeezing the whites back into her skull. She left Bennett to curse himself for finding pleasure in her approval.

Hours passed and he never attempted to stand. He mopped his face with his sleeve. He didn’t even bother with his glasses; they had slipped down his nose and he doubted that they would stay if he chose to replace them. There was something inhuman about this girl. He was a mere child in her presence; no, that wasn’t right... he was a sea gull.

There was a tiny dot of light on his desk. He couldn’t get rid of it. He covered it with a piece of paper, and there it shone upon that paper, strong enough to blind him. He seized a heavy textbook, slamming it down upon the speck; again and again he threw book upon book over the spot

of light yet there it shone, winking in mockery. The doctor's heart rate was rising; there was a thick, wet popping in the veins in his neck. His skin burned a baking white and his cracked lips gasped for breath. There was a horrible whining about the room; every time someone in the building turned on a light, Bennett was sure that he could hear the alteration in the electrical current, and it was enough to deafen him.

He was drowning, he was sure of it, in a red lake at sunrise. Air was circulating through his lungs and yet no oxygen was absorbed. He fell at last to the floor, gulping and gasping beneath his star map, which twinkled down upon him indifferently. He implored the stars, with gaping eyes, to help him, but they only sparkled and drifted away. It was only after so many years that he noticed how terrible they were, watching for generations the sufferings of man and standing idly by. The light of day faded from his office, and the night that replaced it was the darkest he'd ever seen.

His psychiatrist certificate hung near by. That was his; he was a doctor. That wasn't right. He was a child. He was a sea gull.

