

The Optometrist's Door

By Zeph Auerbach

Richard Palmer waddled to a stop on Streatham High Street and checked his scribbled to-do list. After some deliberation he decided to go for '10:30 Optician' instead of 'Buy bread & corned beef'. He'd get to the optician early, but he couldn't stand the thought of arriving late for his appointment, only to be told he'd have to wait 3 weeks for another. He set off with a determined stride.

The appointment was well overdue as it was. He'd had too much on, too much to sort out. Despite the fact that his spectacles had been giving him jip, and he feared a new prescription was inevitable, he just remembered the palaver it'd been before: the first pair hadn't fitted, the second pair had pinched his nose, and the third pair had given him headaches. In the seat of an optician's testing room he always felt particularly weak. A helpless creature under close personal scrutiny. "This thing needs lenses or it cannot function. What shall we do with it?"

Richard checked his speed. Why was he walking so fast? He was already ahead of time. The last thing he needed was to get there even earlier, to have to wait in that small room, on that high leather chair, sweating and gasping for breath.

When Richard entered the testing room he was immediately put at ease by the smiling and slightly overweight man in a white coat who shook his hand and said, "Hi Richard, I'll be your optometrist today."

"What's the difference between an optician and an optometrist?" Richard asked.

"Well," he said, drawing the word out and bobbing his head reassuringly to show empathy, "what you think of as an optician is technically now called an optometrist. An optician fits glasses. I measure eyesight. Perhaps not an important distinction. But in this industry, we think it's important to see things clearly." His lips curled at one side into a wry smile.

As the optometrist started writing his preliminary notes he rattled off a few casual jokes and pleasantries. Richard caught himself thinking of the man – despite being his junior – as avuncular. But not like his actual uncles, who had been cold (and were now dead). But like the uncles that other people had. The uncles he would have liked.

Richard made a conscious decision to try out an old joke: "I went to a different optician first. I said, Doctor, Doctor! I need my eyes tested! He said: I'll say, this is a bakery!"

The optometrist looked at him quizzically, and Richard felt like he'd done something wrong. Perhaps he'd fumbled the words – typical – or perhaps in this room the jokes were the preserve of the optometrist. The optometrist noted something down. Was it something about his old, stupid joke? Was this part of it? Had they begun?

Without any further introduction, the optometrist clicked a switch, the lights dimmed, and Richard saw a light box reflected in the mirror in front of him, with two smiley faces, one on green light, one on red. "OK, so tell me which you see more clearly: the green or the red?"

"The green."

"Right. Put these on for me." Richard took off his old, scratched, greened-at-the-edges spectacles and put on the huge mechanical pair he remembered from many previous appointments – they resembled the elaborate eyebrows of owls. When he'd been a child he'd wanted one of these to take home, so that he could augment his vision with different lenses at will: binoculars, microscopes, night vision, X-Ray. He still thought today that having a pair might make the whole rigmarole of changing spectacles a little easier.

The optometrist slid something black in front of his right eye, and a lens in front of his left.

"Right." Click. "The green or the red?"

"The gr... no, the red."

"Right." Switch of lens. Click. "The green or the red?"

Richard squinted (was he allowed to squint?) and mumbled. "The... green?"

“Right.” Switch. Click. “The green or the red?”

“Well...” Richard said, squirming somewhat in his chair, “The smiley face is more vibrant on the green but it’s also fuzzier, so...”

“So the green or the red?”

“Green,” Richard said, just to move past it. But it just happened again.

“Right.” Switch. Click. “The green or the red?”

“I... don’t know. Neither?”

The two smiley faces just hung there, competing in a stony silence, growing only less distinct with each passing second, as Richard feared that somehow he had failed this test and he would be told to leave. Perhaps ‘Neither’ was not a valid option. Perhaps this test had been designed so that one face was always clearer than the other. But surely-

“Okey-dokey,” the optometrist said, switching off the lights and continuing to scratch away notes on his form with an illegible scrawl.

It all happened again for his right eye: initial certitude swiftly overwhelmed by self-doubt.

“Okey-dokey,” the optometrist said again. He removed the mechanical owl spectacles from Richard’s face.

The room suddenly went pitch black.

“Do you have any medical problems?” the optometrist asked.

“Umm. A few, yes,” Richard said, and he listed the three he thought most pertinent, as he worried about whether the optometrist was going to remember them or was writing them down in the darkness.

A thin beam of extremely bright white light broke through, coming from a torch in the optometrist’s hand.

“Look past my left ear,” the optometrist instructed. Richard looked as far left as he could. The pain from this straining was compounded by the blinding light. His eyes were instructed to look this way and that, and each time they had to strain a little more, causing them to tremble and tear up. How unnatural it is, to hold your eyes wide open in a pitch black room. He could feel the steady breath of the optometrist on his face. The smell of mint disguised all else.

“And your family,” the optometrist said, “any medical problems in your family?”

“Not any more,” Richard said, before taking a big, awkward gulp.

“But did they have?”

“My grandmother had cataracts. My dad had macular degeneration. My grandmother had what was called dementia praecox, episodes of psychosis - is that relevant?”

The optometrist didn’t answer. “Look up,” he said.

Richard could see the intricate network of veins behind his eyes, flashing and fading like the after-images of finely detailed lightning bolts. He decided that he didn’t want to be able to see these.

“Look down,” the optometrist said, his voice creaking slowly, a great calm apparently coming over him as Richard grew increasingly restless yet just as powerless, pinioned to the chair.

“Look up. As far as you can. Richard, why did you come here today?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, why did you book an appointment?”

“It’s been a few years and I’m not sure I can see accurately.”

“Okey-dokey,” the optometrist said, switching the light back on, startling Richard.

The optometrist put the mechanical owl spectacles back on him, adjusted the lenses, and pressed a switch so that a pyramid of capital letters appeared on the white light box in the mirror.

“What line can you read?”

“Probably the third to the bottom? Shall I try? A, L, X, M – or N – D, E, B or maybe R.”

“And the next line?”

But did I get that one correct? Richard thought, frustrated.

“I’ll have a go. R, H – or M, no H, definitely H – I, X or A, N, N,”

The optometrist made notes very rapidly. He blacked out Richard's left eye again and held a lens in front of his right eye.

"Clearer with 1," he said, then rotating the lens, "or 2?"

"1."

"Clearer with 1... or 2?"

"2."

It was this this again. But Richard felt more confident about his answers his time.

"Clearer with 1... or 2?"

"1!"

"Clear with 1... or 2?"

"2!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure."

And Richard answered the questions until the optometrist was satisfied. Notes were completed.

"Okey-dokey," the optometrist said. He slotted five or six different lenses into the mechanical owl spectacles and held a different instrument up to Richard's left eye, peering through it. He moved the instrument slowly from left to right.

"Look off to the distance," the optometrist said, which Richard considered a strange thing to say in a small room. There wasn't much to look at here. Boxes of lenses, contact lenses, files. A small menagerie of instruments on the floor and shelves in front of them. A nondescript door to Richard's left.

"What is this one for?" Richard asked, a little more confident after breezing through the '1 or 2?' round.

"This is a retinoscope. It bounces a beam of light off the back of your eye." He took one lens out and replaced it with another.

"How does it work?"

"Well Richard, basically I can see whether the light is focusing on the back of your eye - the retina - or if it's actually focusing in front or behind your retina. And I can choose different lenses to get closer to it, and I know I'm right when I get a perfect red eye. And I'm just about to get it..." He adjusted the lenses slightly. "There."

"So I'm not needed." Richard said, matter-of-fact. "Why ask me all the questions?"

"Well, we have the subjective tests where we ask you the questions, and we have the objective tests like this. And what we need to do is marry the two together. We need the subjective responses that you give, which are about what you are perceiving, to match up with the objective measurements from instruments like the retinoscope. They converge on your prescription."

"And if the two don't match up? If they don't agree?"

"That only happens very rarely," the optometrist said. "Okey dokey," he said, slapping his thighs and standing up. "Now for the field test."

Richard had to move to one of the machines at the other side of the room. He was instructed to place his chin on a rest and peer into a chamber covered by a neat grid and tiny bulbs. He'd never done this one before. He felt like he was putting on a huge front-facing mask, as if preparing for some strange futuristic battle, which he was entering against his will.

"Press this button whenever you see a light flash on," he was instructed.

The lights flashed on and off very rapidly, and at first he was second-guessing himself on whether he had actually seen something or had just imagined it. But soon he got the hang of it and was proud of the speed of his reactions.

"Why do this test?" Richard asked, once the test was over.

"Just to be sure," the optometrist said, "I mean, just to be sure that your peripheral vision is fine. The field test detects blind spots or 'scotomas'. Through degeneration some people develop

gaps in their vision, but ordinarily we move our head or our eyes to focus on what we want to see, so we might be unaware of the blind spots.” He scribbled some more notes.

“Okey-dokey, back to the chair please, Richard.” Richard felt increasingly giddy, being shuttled from one test to the next.

Back in the chair. His head was forced into a metal frame, his chin on a rest.

“I’m going to test the pressure of your eyes. It’s for glaucoma. I’ll fire a little air at your eyes. It won’t cause damage.”

Richard wanted to back away but knew he already appeared cowardly enough. He held his face up against the frame. Like cattle facing the bolt.

The jet of air came and went. It surprised him a little but it was fine. He cautiously removed his head from the frame.

“Okey-dokey. Could you please read this story for me,” the optometrist asked him, handing him a piece of paper with a story written in small font.

“OK,” Richard said, clearing his throat. “The man went down to the kitchen in his pyjamas and started to crack the eggs for scrambling. But then he realised that he would only be cooking the eggs for one. He didn’t think it was worth – all the effort, the washing up. He still expected to see them walking through the door, telling him how many eggs they wanted.” Richard paused, checking what he was reading. He looked up but the optometrist prompted him to go on. “He gave up on the eggs and walked to the bathroom. The light had been left on. That was like them, to always be leaving the light on. They knew that this got to him. And he started to shout throughout the house...”

Richard squirmed in his seat in distress. These words...

“Go on,” the optometrist said.

“... He caught himself only when it was too late, and he had already shouted. His voice echoed back to him. He didn’t know who he was admonishing. He didn’t know who had left the bathroom light on. It must have been himself. Who else could it have been?” Richard thought this was too personal, he wondered how-

“Go on,” the optometrist said, writing notes very fast all the while.

“... He felt embarrassed, and worse than this, embarrassed *alone*, without anybody to share it with. She would’ve probably seen the funny side. And Alexander, he probably would’ve smiled a cheeky grin and said, ‘I’m sorry, Daddy!’ But now...” Richard cut off what he was saying and looked directly at the optometrist. “*Wait a second here.*”

“I think we’ve completed the test, Richard,” the optometrist said, snatching the story away.

“Give that back! What was that story from? How did you get those details? That *name*?” He was trembling with agitation and sweating down the sides of his face.

“Richard,” the optometrist said, “the sheet of paper is blank.” He held the paper up to Richard, but Richard saw the writing, just as it was. He saw the details; they could not be ignored.

“But...”

“And the field test machine was not switched on, Richard.”

“But I saw the lights... They were flashing *here* and *here*,” he flicked his finger in different places in his peripheral vision.

“The machine wasn’t on. Richard, I had my first suspicions of a problem when you displayed serious discrepancies on the subjective testing. The letters you read out were not the letters which I could see – which are up on the box there. On reflection, I think you were spelling out names.”

“No...”

“And when I asked you if you preferred 1 or 2, you gave contradictory answers. You preferred 1 to 2 and then 2 to 1, even when they were identical. I asked you the same question and you gave different answers. I-”

“No...” Richard sat in horror.

“Richard, this does happen, and more frequently than people know of. Sometimes the objective and the subjective diverge so far from each other. A subject’s perceptions differ wildly –

too wildly – from reality. In these situations it does need to be reported. People do need to be alerted. People *have* been alerted.”

“I need to talk to somebody. I just need to talk things over and-”

Richard could hear footsteps from just outside the nondescript door to his left.

“Richard, I have just performed a highly accurate set of tests on your perception. Your perceptions are off the mark from reality, *way* off, dangerously off. We cannot let you be out there, in the real world, amongst vulnerable people.”

“I need to see a doctor-”

“You will see many doctors soon, Richard.”

The nondescript door opened and two figures wearing white coats appeared, behind them the harsh brightness of daylight causing Richard to wince and hold his hand to his eyes.

The figures approached and soon an arm was on his wrist, urging him to stand up. To go with them. He was disoriented and soon found himself being led by them.

“Just one second,” the optometrist called to them. Richard thought that this would be it: this whole thing would be declared to be a prank, some sort of twisted joke.

“One more thing. Here,” the optometrist said, handing a few sheets of paper to one of the figures, “He also needs a new pair of glasses.”