

THE GLASSES

JONATHAN LETHEM

Rows of frames sat on glass shelves, clear lenses reflecting gray light from the Brooklyn avenue. Outside, rain fell. At the door a cardboard box waited for umbrellas. The carpet was pink and yellow, to the limits of the floor, to the tightly seamed glass cases. The empty shop was like a cartoonist's eyeball workshop, hundreds of bare outlines yearning for pupils, for voices. They fell short of expression themselves. The whole shop fell short. There was no radio. The white-coated opticians leaned on their glass counters, dreaming of their wives, of beautiful women who suddenly needed glasses. One of them moved into the rear of the shop and made a call.

The other turned as the door chimed, two notes blurred momentarily in the rain's hiss.

"You're back."

"Damn fucking right I'm back." The black man wiped his feet just inside the door, though there wasn't a mat, then jogged forward into the shop. He wore a baseball cap, and his glasses.

The optician didn't move. "You don't need to use language," he said.

They'd sold him his glasses yesterday. One hundred dollars. He'd paid with cash, not out of a wallet.

The customer bounced from one foot to another like a boxer. An ingrown beard scarred the underside of his long jaw. He pushed his chin forward, keeping his hands by his side.

"Look. Same damn thing."

The optician grunted slightly and moved to look. He was as tall as the customer, and fatter.

"A smudge," he said.

He was still purring in his boredom. This distraction hadn't persuaded him yet that it would become an event, a real dent in the afternoon.

"*Scratched*," said the customer. "Same as the last pair. If you can't fix the problem why'd you sell me the damn glasses?"

"A smudge," said the optician. "Clean it off. Here."

The customer ducked backwards. "Keep off. Don't fool with me. Can't clean it off. They're already messed up. Like the old ones.

They're *all* messed *up*."

"Let me see," said the optician.

"Where's Dr. Bucket? I want to talk to the doctor."

"*Burkhardt*. And he's not a doctor. Let me see." The optician drew in his stomach, adjusted his own glasses.

"*You're* not the doctor, man." The customer danced away recklessly, still thrusting out his chin.

"We're both the same," said the optician wearily. "We make glasses. Let me see."

The second optician came out of the back, smoothing his hair, and said: "What?"

"Bucket!"

The second optician looked at the first, then turned to the customer. "Something wrong with the glasses?"

"Same thing as yesterday. Same place. Look." Checking his agitation, he stripped his glasses off with his right hand and offered them to the second optician.

"First of all, you should take them off with two hands, like I showed you," said the second optician. He pinched the glasses at the two

hinges, demonstrating. Then he turned them and raised them to his own face.

The inside of the lenses were marked, low and close to the nose.

“You touched them. That’s the problem.”

“No.”

“Of course you did. That’s fingerprints.”

“Damn, Bucket, man. I’ll show you the old ones. You can’t even fix the problem.”

“The problem is you touched them. Here.”

The second optician went to the counter and dipped the glasses in a shallow bath of cleanser, dried them with a chamois cloth. The customer bobbed forward anxiously, trying to see.

“What do you scratch at your eyes all the time?” said the first optician, smiling now. The problem was solved.

“Shut up,” said the customer, pointing a finger at the first optician. “Just shut up. You’re not my doctor on this.”

“Nobody is,” said the first optician. “You don’t need a doctor, you need to keep your hands out of your eyes.”

“Shut up.”

The second optician glared at the first. He handed the glasses to the customer. "Let me see you put them on."

The customer bent his head down and lifted the glasses to his face.

"Wait a minute, I couldn't see . . ."

"It's the *fit*," said the customer. "You screwed up the *fit*."

"The bill of your cap was in the way," said the first optician.

"Put them on again," said the second.

"Same thing," said the customer, shaking his head. He pulled off the glasses, again with one hand. "Look. Still there. Little scratches."

The first optician stepped up close to the customer. "Sure. You touched it again. When I couldn't see. It's how you put them on."

"He uses his thumbs," said the second, snorting.

"Little scratches, man. I paid a hundred dollars, second day I got these little scratches again. Might as well kept the old ones." He thrust the glasses at the first optician.

"They're not scratched," said the first optician. "Just dirty. Your hands are dirty."

The customer flared his nostrils, twitched his cheek, raised his eyebrows. “That’s *weak*, Bucket. I come in here show you a pair of glasses get all rubbed and scratched, I’m looking for some *help*. You tell me I need some new glasses. Now the new ones got the *same* problem, you tell me I got dirty *hands*. These the glasses you sold me, my man.”

The second optician let air slip very slowly through his tightened lips. “Your old pair was scratched. You had them, what, 10 years? They were falling off your face. The hinges were shot, the nosepiece was gone. The lens touched your cheek.” He paused to let this litany sink in. “The glasses I sold you are fine. The fit is fine. You just have to break some habits.”

“Habits!”

“He’s a clown,” said the first optician, leaning back against the counter, sticking out his belly. “We should’ve thrown him out yesterday.”

“Instead you took my *money*,” hissed the customer. “Good enough for you yesterday. You couldn’t see *black* for all the green yesterday. Now I look black to you. Now I’m a

clown.”

“You think we need your hundred dollars?”

The first optician managed a laugh.

“That’s not necessary,” said the second, to the customer. He ignored his partner. “We’ll take care of you. Sit down, let me look at the fit.”

“Shit. Your man needs to shut up.”

“Okay, please.” The second optician pulled up a chair from beside the counter. The padding was pink to match the carpet.

“Sit down.”

The partners fell easily into a good optician/bad optician routine. It was pure instinct. Perhaps the customer sensed his options dwindling, perhaps not. Probably he did. The air went out of him a little as he took the chair.

And the glasses, the proof, were in enemy hands. The second optician was rinsing them again.

“Shit, Bucket,” said the customer, petulance in his voice now. “What you know about my *habits?*”

“Okay,” said the second optician, ignoring

the remark. His voice was soothing. "I just want to see you put them on. Just naturally, like you would. Don't push them into your face. They won't fall off. Just fit them over your ears.

Then I'll check the fit."

He offered the glasses, then pulled them back as the customer reached for them. "Take off your hat," he said admonishingly.

The customer took off his hat. His hair was grooved where the lip of the hat had rested. The first optician, watching from his place at the counter, reflexively reached up and fluffed his own hair.

"Here you go. Nice and easy." The second optician handed over the glasses.

The customer stuffed the hat in his ass pocket, then raised the glasses with both hands, holding them by the earpieces awkwardly. His hands trembled.

"That's it," said the second optician. "Let's have a look at the fit."

The customer dropped his hands to his lap. The second optician brought his face in close to the customer's. For a moment they were still, breathing together tightly, eyes flickering. The

intimacy calmed the customer. He was in some sense now getting his due, his money's worth. He could feel the second optician's breath graze his cheek.

Then the second optician saw the marks. "Wait a minute," said the second optician, straightening his body. "They're still smudged."

"I told you!" said the customer.

"He touched them again," said the first optician, back at the counter. "I told you, he puts his thumb on the lens."

"You touched them again," said the second optician.

"You watched me! You saw! I didn't touch them!"

The second optician shook his head, crestfallen. "I don't understand how it happened."

"Simple, he touched them," said the first.

"Liar!" shouted the customer. "You watched me."

"Listen," said the second optician, rallying, a little frenzied. "This doesn't make sense. What do you think? They smudged themselves?"

You touched them!”

“I want my money back, Bucket.”

“Look, I can give you your money back, it’s not going to do any good. You’re screwing up your glasses yourself. It’s going to be the same wherever you go.”

“It’s the fit.”

“What are you saying, fit?” interrupted the first optician.

“You think they’re touching your cheek?”

“That’s right. My cheek.”

“Show me where,” said the first, leaning in.

“For chrissake, don’t make him put his hands up there,” said the second. The opticians had traded places now, the fierce, the patient.

Only the customer was unperturbed, true to himself. He moved his hand with slow drama, like a magician, to point at his face. Shifting and sighing, the opticians closed around him to see.

The rain outside slowed, died. Cars whirred through the water in the street.

“It’s my *cheek*,” reminded the customer.

“Maybe your last ones touched you there,”

said the second optician. "Your nosepiece was all worn down. These don't touch."

"I feel it."

"No you don't. You're used to touching yourself there, putting your fingers in there," said the second. "That's what I meant by habits."

"You don't know," said the customer quietly, with a Buddhist calm. "Now you got to give me my money back."

"We'll see about that," said the second optician grimly. He plucked the glasses from the customer's face.

"This is getting silly," said the first optician to the second. "Give him his money. Get him out of here."

"I'll make him sit here all night if I have to," said the second. "He's putting his fingers on them."

"I got all the time in the world," said the customer happily.

"Sit still," said the second optician. He again dried the glasses with the chamois, and replaced them on the customer's face. "Keep your hands down."

The customer sat, his hands on his knees, the chord of tension in his body stilled at some cost. The second optician leaned in close to the customer's face to inspect the juncture of nosepiece and nose.

"How long are we going to keep him here?" said the first optician pleadingly.

"I told you, as long as it takes."

"You're kidding me."

"Help me watch him. Watch his hands."

The customer smiled, delighted now. He could play this game and win. They'd see the scratches reappear. He focused on his hands. They were all focused on his hands. He kept his hands on his knees.

"We gotta get him out of the way at least," said the first optician.

"Behind the counter," said the second. In his determination he had an answer for everything.

"Here you go, Bucket," said the customer.

"Keep your hands down!" said the second optician. "Let me move the chair. Joe, watch his hands."

The customer was installed behind the

counter, hands on his knees, chin up, waiting. The bill of his cap jutted from his back pocket.

The opticians leaned against the wall and the counter, inspecting the customer as though he were a horse on which they'd bet, and they gamblers looking for some giveaway imperfection, some tremble in its flank.

"He's gonna touch them," said the first optician.

"He *wants* to," said the second. "But he knows we're watching."

"You'll see," said the customer.

"Look at his hands," said the first. "He can't take it, he's gotta go up there. It's like a tic, a whatchamacallit. He's got like Tourette's syndrome or something."

"Fuck you, motherfucker," said the customer genially.

"We've got forever," said the second optician, his tone smooth, his calm restored.

"We'll wait it out."

The door chimed. They all turned. The new customer was young, in his late twenties. A boy to these men, a boy in a sweater. He turned to the glass shelves on the wall.

“Can I help you find something?” said the second optician, stepping up. Then he turned and hissed: “Watch his hands!”

“Just browsing,” said the new customer, and immediately wondered: was browsing the right word for glasses?

And who was that black man in the chair?

“You have glasses before?” asked the second optician.

“Yes, uh, I don’t always wear them.”

“You want to see anything, let me know.”

“Okay.”

The new customer moved along the wall of frames, searching for the expensive ones, the Japanese titanium-alloy designs.

Almost involuntarily, he glanced back, and the black man in the chair bugged his eyes at him. A plea for help?

The two opticians in their white coats, gold glasses, and puffy hair reminded him of Nazis. Nazi doctors. Or perhaps Mafia. Yes, definitely Mafia. He’d heard about this neighborhood. He knew of the dark old economic engines still humming away under the bright yuppie surface.

But should he get involved?

He slid closer along the back wall and had another look. The black man sat with his hands on his knees, obviously containing himself. His keepers' eyes shifted from their prisoner to the new customer, watching. What was it they'd said—*watch his hands*?

“Are you okay?” the new customer blurted.

“Fuck you think, jackass? Fuck you staring at? You see something wrong with me?”

The black man gesticulated, waving the new customer away, and the second optician said: “The hands, the hands.”

“What's wrong with his hands?” said the new customer, even as he backed away.

“Mind your own business,” said the first optician.

“Damn. He thinks I'm a shoplifter, Bucket. Fucking racist motherfucker.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Tell him, Bucket. I'm a paying customer.”

“It's okay,” said the new customer, moving to the door, and out, into the dying afternoon. The sun had arrived just to depart, to throw a few long shadows around as though it had

worked the whole day.

The three of them watched the new customer disappear from view of the shop window.

“Now you’re scaring off our customers,” said the second optician fondly.

“Screw him,” said the first optician, waving dismissively at the door. “He was a looker. Just browsing, you heard him.”

“Racist jackass got to go jumping to conclusions,” said the customer, fingers bouncing on his knees.

“Let me see your hands,” said the first optician.

“You got eyes!”

“No, I mean turn them over. Let me take a look.”

The customer furrowed his brow. The first optician took the customer’s left hand in his own and gently turned it over.

“You got very rough hands,” said the first optician. “Look at your fingertips. Very rough.”

The second optician bent in to look, and so did the customer, their heads all drawing

together.

“See that?” said the first optician. “Think he could of scratched up his lenses with fingers like that?”

“Hmmm,” said the second optician. “Plastic lenses, sure. Like his old ones. Not glass. Only smudge glass.”

“*If* I touched it,” said the customer.

“Yeah, right, *if*,” said the first optician, still holding the customer’s hand. “We’re suspending judgment.”

“That’s what makes you a good man,” said the customer. “You want to do the right thing.”

“Yes we do,” said the first optician. “That’s why we’re sitting here. Long as it takes.”

“Don’t want to go jumping to no conclusions.”

“Never.”

“Damn straight.”

The first optician went to the counter and took out a pack of cigarettes. The second optician sighed.

“You got a good man here, Bucket,” said the customer, pointing. “I spoke too soon.”

“Watch your hands,” said the second optician.

“You’ll watch ’em for me, Bucket, I know you will.”

The sun was down. Shops outside rolled down their gates. Restaurant deliverymen on green bicycles began to fill the street. Men dragged home milk and flowers and shuttered umbrellas.

The first optician lit another cigarette and put it in the customer’s mouth for him, so the customer could keep his hands on his knees.

The second optician moved into the back of the shop, to call his wife, to say he’d be late.