

# Eyes

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Their eyes sit on a shelf of fabric professing what the fabric keeps hidden away; our expressions crippled by the necessity of this fabric. The unnoticed characteristics of our eyes' past come to light in the environment of today. Slowly, I have learned to gather information from the two spheres of life resting above the fabric we want to hate so bad. That fabric has shifted the way we interact, the way we observe, the way our brains grasp onto something previously irrelevant to the interpretations of our fellow companions.

I was told to look other people in the eyes when I talked to them or shook their hand. A sense of respect is given to people willing to stare into another person's eyes, but it is unnatural. Parents indoctrinate us into the practice of looking one in the eyes, but the stare never seems unforced. Naturally, I want to look at a person's hand when I grab it, then move to the eyes, but this hesitation causes more doubt than respect. "Look a man in the eyes when you shake his hand" my father would say to me. How is this possible—practice. The sixth sense of knowing where a person's hand will be and where yours should be while locking eyes with the other person. Practice has enabled me the ability to divert my gaze from another hand, but the untrained feeling I had when I was younger is slowly creeping back to me.

I need more practice. I don't want more practice (that would necessitate an indefinite use of masks), but I need it. The cues sent by an unexpected smile or the sticking out of one's tongue are non-existent in the social atmosphere of today; the rarity of dimples has become an impossibility; the words one could send silently across the room have disappeared from classrooms and family dinners. It's easy to remember the motion of lips when forced to silently express the three words couples use the most: "I love you," but not so easy to perform anymore. Twenty-one years of social practice enabled me to understand the feelings of another person through facial expressions, but I must have not been focusing on the eyes. For COVID initially made me feel like a first grader still developing the social skills necessary to understand others.

Slowly, I've begun to develop a new sense of understanding. The eyes are the key, the previously untapped source of expression that has evaded me for so long. Look into one's eyes and their face blossoms with life. I noticed the eyes before COVID; there are some things the eyes do that are just hard to miss (rolling the eyes or blinking), but I never had to rely on understanding the eyes. I didn't want to be seen staring awkwardly at somebody's eyes before COVID, but now that is what's required. I see eyes everywhere now, displayed upon a shelf of fabric, waiting for the next onlooker to develop an opinion. The emotions portrayed by those eyes, so small yet so big, have slowly become more and more familiar to me.

Exasperation, attraction, suspicion, sullenness, sadness, anger, joy, and affection are all emotions that can be extracted from the observation of eyes. The eyes display an array of emotions, but how separate are these emotions from the lower half of our face? Suspicion, for example, is commonly expressed through the squinting of one's eyes, but try to look suspicious without moving your

mouth. It's hard. It almost seems impossible to squint without moving your mouth at all. The mouth seems to be an attribute to any sense of suspicion being casted by the eyes, but this attribute is not accessible to us anymore. Suspicion must now be understood as an activity strictly expressed by the eyes, but can we understand suspicion without the mouth—I think so.

I walk into my local Mexican restaurant now and don't initially focus on what people are wearing, how they walk, what they're eating, or what their buying; my attention is immediately overtaken by the eyes. I'm not always looking for emotion or some sign of what that woman walking to her table is feeling, but it's becoming more and more feasible to find these emotions in the eyes. The tired eyed construction worker walking to the bar, a long day of rough work overwhelms the strength of his eyes. There is a minute difference in what some people might call "wide eyed" compared to the opposite generally called "tired eyed" or "weak eyed." Fractions of an inch differentiate the two descriptions, but the emotional difference is extreme. The construction worker displays the "weaker" of these extremes, tired, relieved to relax, and pondering over the day to come. Then he makes it to the bar and removes the fabric so he can take a sip, revealing the face his eyes had already told me was there, and the old ways of understanding a person come back into view.

Without the fabric, I don't find myself attracted to the eyes as much. My past senses kick in and I search for a smile, a frown, a purse of the lips, anything that would have tipped me off to the feelings of another before COVID. The fabric highlights the eyes, gives them a pedestal to rest on, drawing my attention to what was previously unnoticed, but it's not always emotions that are noticed by me more often now; the pure beauty of eyes has become more apparent to me in recent months.

All eyes are beautiful, but eyes without the distraction of a smile are sometimes breathtaking; the same cannot be said about a smile. Place a blindfold over every person's eyes and the beauty of a smile can be seen to go only so far. Some have white teeth, some yellow, some no teeth, some wide smiles, some tiny grins, but the traits of a smile do not seem to individualize the smiler. If smiles were incredibly diverse, then one would think the type of smile we have would be on our driver's license right underneath the color of our eyes. Our eyes, however, are extremely diverse in color, which establishes a sense of individualism that cannot escape any of us. Yes, we all have eyes and they're generally all structured the same, but the colors that eyes have at their disposal is what makes them so alluring. Hazel, blue, brown, green, amber, and gray dominate the color of eyes, but these colors appear in limitless amounts of variations. A mix of any of these colors, a bright blue, a dark blue, green with a hint of brown, blue with specks of hazel, even two eyes of completely different colors can rest above the piece of fabric we know so well; these remarkable colors have become increasingly more apparent as my gaze has been trained to observe the eyes more carefully.

Before COVID, I used to occasionally be amazed by the sheer beauty of a person's eyes, but now I am stunned with the beauty of eyes every day. The smiles that were once so distracting are gone, and my focus is now directed to the eyes that were once so underappreciated. I catch myself staring often now, thinking to myself how beautiful that person's eyes are, how rich the colors appear when displayed separate from the smile, how I never realized the universal beauty of the human eye before COVID. Take the fabric off and the beauty is still there, but not nearly as noticeable. Prior to the

pandemic, the smiles that I so often directed my gaze at were unknowingly leading my sense of beauty astray.

The smiles, the dimples, the lips, the tongue, the things hidden behind the fabric we despise so much have been stripped of their importance; one might say they were never that important at all. Especially, after socializing in the world we live in today. The eyes have escaped the shadow of a smile, the synchronized expressing of emotions, and been given the opportunity to work their magic apart from the assistance of a smile, a frown, a smirk or any of the other things the fabric covered part of our face is capable of. The beauty that was once so rarely noticed has been thrown into a new light; the ubiquitous beauty of eyes is now displayed upon a shelf of fabric for all to see. The colors that once seemed unnoticeable are now unforgettable and capable of snatching my stare for more than a quick glance. COVID has taken many things away from us, but the one thing I've been given in the past year is a newfound appreciation for the profound beauty and capabilities of the eyes we so often take for granted.