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**SARAMAGO**

*Blindness*

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

# Blindness

*Translated from the Portuguese  
by Giovanni Pontiero*

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*For Pilar*  
*For my daughter Violante*

IN MEMORIAM  
*Giovanni Pontiero*

If you can see, look.  
If you can look, observe.  
FROM THE *Book of Exhortations*



The amber light came on. Two of the cars ahead accelerated before the red light appeared. At the pedestrian crossing the sign of a green man lit up. The people who were waiting began to cross the road, stepping on the white stripes painted on the black surface of the asphalt, there is nothing less like a zebra, however, that is what it is called. The motorists kept an impatient foot on the clutch, leaving their cars at the ready, advancing, retreating like nervous horses that can sense the whiplash about to be inflicted. The pedestrians have just finished crossing but the sign allowing the cars to go will be delayed for some seconds, some people maintain that this delay, while apparently so insignificant, has only to be multiplied by the thousands of traffic lights that exist in the city and by the successive changes of their three colours to produce one of the most serious causes of traffic jams or bottlenecks, to use the more current term.

The green light came on at last, the cars moved off briskly, but then it became clear that not all of them were equally quick off the mark. The car at the head of the middle lane has stopped, there must be some mechanical fault, a loose accelerator pedal, a gear lever that has stuck, problem with the suspension, jammed brakes, breakdown in the electric circuit, unless he has simply run out of gas, it would not be the first time such a thing has happened. The next group of pedestrians to gather at the crossing see the driver of the stationary car wave his arms behind the windshield, while the cars behind him frantically sound their horns. Some drivers have already got out of their cars, prepared to push the stranded vehicle to a spot where it will not hold up the traffic, they beat furiously on the closed windows, the man inside turns his head in their direction, first to one side then the other, he is clearly shouting something, to judge by the movements of his mouth he appears to be repeating some words, not one word but three, as turns out to be the case when someone finally manages to open the door, I am blind.

Who would have believed it. Seen merely at a glance, the man's eyes seem healthy, the iris looks bright, luminous, the sclera white, as compact as porcelain. The eyes wide open, the wrinkled skin of the face, his eyebrows suddenly screwed up, all this, as anyone can see, signifies that he is distraught with anguish. With a rapid movement, what was in sight has

disappeared behind the man's clenched fists, as if he were still trying to retain inside his mind the final image captured, a round red light at the traffic lights. I am blind, I am blind, he repeated in despair as they helped him to get out of the car, and the tears welling up made those eyes which he claimed were dead, shine even more. These things happen, it will pass you'll see, sometimes it's nerves, said a woman. The lights had already changed again, some inquisitive passersby had gathered around the group, and the drivers further back who did not know what was going on, protested at what they thought was some common accident, a smashed headlight, a dented fender, nothing to justify this upheaval, Call the police, they shouted and get that old wreck out of the way. The blind man pleaded, Please, will someone take me home. The woman who had suggested a case of nerves was of the opinion that an ambulance should be summoned to transport the poor man to the hospital, but the blind man refused to hear of it, quite unnecessary, all he wanted was that someone might accompany him to the entrance of the building where he lived. It's close by and you could do me no greater favour. And what about the car, asked someone. Another voice replied, The key is in the ignition, drive the car on to the pavement. No need, intervened a third voice, I'll take charge of the car and accompany this man home. There were murmurs of approval. The blind man felt himself being taken by the arm, Come, come with me, the same voice was saying to him. They eased him into the front passenger seat, and secured the safety belt. I can't see, I can't see, he murmured, still weeping. Tell me where you live, the man asked him. Through the car windows voracious faces spied, avid for some news. The blind man raised his hands to his eyes and gestured, Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white, That little woman was probably right, it could be a matter of nerves, nerves are the very devil, No need to talk to me about it, it's a disaster, yes a disaster, Tell me where you live please, and at the same time the engine started up. Faltering, as if his lack of sight had weakened his memory, the blind man gave his address, then he said, I have no words to thank you, and the other replied, Now then, don't give it another thought, today it's your turn, tomorrow it will be mine, we never know what might lie in store for us, You're right, who would have thought, when I left the house this morning, that something as dreadful as this was about to happen. He was puzzled that they should still be at a

standstill, Why aren't we moving, he asked, The light is on red, replied the other. From now on he would no longer know when the light was red.

As the blind man had said, his home was nearby. But the pavements were crammed with vehicles, they could not find a space to park and were obliged to look for a spot in one of the side streets. There, because of the narrowness of the pavement, the door on the passenger's side would have been little more than a hand's-breadth from the wall, so in order to avoid the discomfort of dragging himself from one seat to the other with the brake and steering wheel in the way, the blind man had to get out before the car was parked. Abandoned in the middle of the road, feeling the ground shifting under his feet, he tried to suppress the sense of panic that welled up inside him. He waved his hands in front of his face, nervously, as if he were swimming in what he had described as a milky sea, but his mouth was already opening to let out a cry for help when at the last minute he felt the other's hand gently touch him on the arm, Calm down, I've got you. They proceeded very slowly, afraid of falling, the blind man dragged his feet, but this caused him to stumble on the uneven pavement, Be patient, we're almost there, the other murmured, and a little further ahead, he asked, Is there anyone at home to look after you, and the blind man replied, I don't know, my wife won't be back from work yet, today it so happened that I left earlier only to have this hit me. You'll see, it isn't anything serious, I've never heard of anyone suddenly going blind, And to think I used to boast that I didn't even need glasses, Well it just goes to show. They had arrived at the entrance to the building, two women from the neighbourhood looked on inquisitively at the sight of their neighbour being led by the arm but neither of them thought of asking, Have you got something in your eye, it never occurred to them nor would he have been able to reply, Yes, a milky sea. Once inside the building, the blind man said, Many thanks, I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, I can manage on my own now, No need to apologise, I'll come up with you, I wouldn't be easy in my mind if I were to leave you here. They got into the narrow elevator with some difficulty, What floor do you live on, On the third, you cannot imagine how grateful I am, Don't thank me, today it's you, Yes, you're right, tomorrow it might be you. The elevator came to a halt, they stepped out on to the landing, Would you like me to help you open the door, Thanks, that's something I think I can do for myself. He took from his pocket a small bunch of keys, felt them one by one along the serrated edge, and said, It must be this one, and

feeling for the keyhole with the fingertips of his left hand, he tried to open the door. It isn't this one, Let me have a look, I'll help you. The door opened at the third attempt. Then the blind man called inside, Are you there, no one replied, and he remarked, Just as I was saying, she still hasn't come back. Stretching out his hands, he groped his way along the corridor, then he came back cautiously, turning his head in the direction where he calculated the other fellow would be, How can I thank you, he said, It was the least I could do, said the good Samaritan, no need to thank me, and added, Do you want me to help you to get settled and keep you company until your wife arrives. This zeal suddenly struck the blind man as being suspect, obviously he would not invite a complete stranger to come in who, after all, might well be plotting at that very moment how to overcome, tie up and gag the poor defenceless blind man, and then lay hands on anything of value. There's no need, please don't bother, he said, I'm fine, and as he slowly began closing the door, he repeated, There's no need, there's no need.

Hearing the sound of the elevator descending he gave a sigh of relief. With a mechanical gesture, forgetting the state in which he found himself, he drew back the lid of the peep-hole and looked outside. It was as if there were a white wall on the other side. He could feel the contact of the metallic frame on his eyebrow, his eyelashes brushed against the tiny lens, but he could not see out, an impenetrable whiteness covered everything. He knew he was in his own home, he recognised the smell, the atmosphere, the silence, he could make out the items of furniture and objects simply by touching them, lightly running his fingers over them, but at the same time it was as if all of this were already dissolving into a kind of strange dimension, without direction or reference points, with neither north nor south, below nor above. Like most people, he had often played as a child at pretending to be blind, and, after keeping his eyes closed for five minutes, he had reached the conclusion that blindness, undoubtedly a terrible affliction, might still be relatively bearable if the unfortunate victim had retained sufficient memory, not just of the colours, but also of forms and planes, surfaces and shapes, assuming of course, that this one was not born blind. He had even reached the point of thinking that the darkness in which the blind live was nothing other than the simple absence of light, that what we call blindness was something that simply covered the appearance of beings and things, leaving them intact behind their black veil. Now, on the

contrary, here he was, plunged into a whiteness so luminous, so total, that it swallowed up rather than absorbed, not just the colours, but the very things and beings, thus making them twice as invisible.

As he moved in the direction of the sitting-room, despite the caution with which he advanced, running a hesitant hand along the wall and not anticipating any obstacles, he sent a vase of flowers crashing to the floor. He had forgotten about any such vase, or perhaps his wife had put it there when she left for work with the intention of later finding some more suitable place. He bent down to appraise the damage. The water had spread over the polished floor. He tried to gather up the flowers, never thinking of the broken glass, a long sharp splinter pricked his finger and, at the pain, childish tears of helplessness sprang to his eyes, blind with whiteness in the middle of his flat, which was turning dark as evening fell. Still clutching the flowers and feeling the blood running down, he twisted round to get the handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it round his finger as best he could. Then, fumbling, stumbling, skirting the furniture, treading warily so as not to trip on the rugs, he reached the sofa where he and his wife watched television. He sat down, rested the flowers on his lap, and, with the utmost care, unrolled the handkerchief. The blood, sticky to the touch, worried him, he thought it must be because he could not see it, his blood had turned into a viscous substance without colour, into something rather alien which nevertheless belonged to him, but like a self-inflicted threat directed at himself. Very slowly, gently probing with his good hand, he tried to locate the splinter of glass, as sharp as a tiny dagger, and, by bringing the nails of his thumb and forefinger together, he managed to extract all of it. He wrapped the handkerchief round the injured finger once more, this time tightly to stop the bleeding, and, weak and exhausted, he leaned back on the sofa. A minute later, because of one of those all too common abdications of the body, that chooses to give up in certain moments of anguish or despair, when, if it were guided by logic alone, all its nerves should be alert and tense, a kind of weariness crept over him, more drowsiness than real fatigue, but just as heavy. He dreamt at once that he was pretending to be blind, he dreamt that he was forever closing and opening his eyes, and that, on each occasion, as if he were returning from a journey, he found waiting for him, firm and unaltered, all the forms and colours of the world as he knew it. Beneath this reassuring certainty, he perceived nevertheless, the dull nagging of uncertainty, perhaps it was a deceptive dream, a dream from

which he would have to emerge sooner or later, without knowing at this moment what reality awaited him. Then, if such a word has any meaning when applied to a weariness that lasted for only a few seconds, and already in that semi-vigilant state that prepares one for awakening, he seriously considered that it was unwise to remain in this state of indecision, shall I wake up, shall I not wake up, shall I wake up, shall I not wake up, there always comes a moment when one has no option but to take a risk, What am I doing here with these flowers on my lap and my eyes closed as if I were afraid of opening them, What are you doing there, sleeping with those flowers on your lap, his wife was asking him.

She did not wait for a reply. Pointedly, she set about gathering up the fragments of the vase and drying the floor, muttering all the while with an irritation she made no attempt to disguise, You might have cleaned up this mess yourself, instead of settling down to sleep as if it were no concern of yours. He said nothing, protecting his eyes behind tightly closed lids, suddenly agitated by a thought, And if I were to open my eyes and see, he asked himself, gripped by anxious hope. The woman drew near, noticed the bloodstained handkerchief, her vexation gone in an instant, Poor man, how did this happen, she asked compassionately as she undid the improvised bandage. Then he wanted with all his strength to see his wife kneeling at his feet, right there, where he knew she was, and then, certain that he would not see her, he opened his eyes, So you've wakened up at last, my sleepyhead, she said smiling. There was silence, and he said, I'm blind, I can't see. The woman lost her patience, Stop playing silly games, there are certain things we must not joke about, How I wish it were a joke, the truth is that I really am blind, I can't see anything, Please, don't frighten me, look at me, here, I'm here, the light is on, I know you're there, I can hear you, touch you, I can imagine you've switched on the light, but I am blind. She began to weep, clung to him, It isn't true, tell me that it isn't true. The flowers had slipped onto the floor, onto the bloodstained handkerchief, the blood had started to trickle again from the injured finger, and he, as if wanting to say with other words, That's the least of my worries, murmured, I see everything white, and he gave a sad smile. The woman sat down beside him, embraced him tightly, kissed him gently on the forehead, on the face, softly on the eyes, You'll see that this will pass, you haven't been ill, no one goes blind from one minute to the next, Perhaps, Tell me how it happened, what did you feel, when, where, no, not yet, wait, the first thing we must do

is to consult an eye specialist, can you think of one, I'm afraid not, neither of us wears glasses, And if I were to take you to the hospital, There isn't likely to be any emergency service for eyes that cannot see, You're right, better that we should go straight to a doctor, I'll look in the telephone directory and locate a doctor who practises nearby. She got up, still questioning him, Do you notice any difference, None, he replied, Pay attention, I'm going to switch off the light and you can tell me, now, Nothing, What do you mean nothing, Nothing, I always see the same white, it's as if there were no night.

He could hear his wife rapidly leaf through the pages of the telephone directory, sniffing to hold back her tears, sighing, and finally saying, This one will do, let's hope he can see us. She dialled a number, asked if that was the surgery, if the doctor was there, if she could speak to him, No, no the doctor doesn't know me, the matter is extremely urgent, yes, please, I understand, then I'll explain the situation to you, but I beg of you to pass on what I have to say to the doctor, the fact is that my husband has suddenly gone blind, yes, yes, all of a sudden, no, no he is not one of the doctor's patients, my husband does not wear glasses and never has, yes, he has excellent eyesight, just like me, I also see perfectly well, ah, many thanks, I'll wait, I'll wait, yes, doctor, all of a sudden, he says he sees everything white, I have no idea what happened, I haven't had time to ask him, I've just arrived home to find him in this state, would you like me to ask him, ah, I'm so grateful to you doctor, we'll come right away, right away. The blind man rose to his feet, Wait, his wife said, first let me attend to this finger, she disappeared for several moments, came back with a bottle of peroxide, another of iodine, cotton wool, a box of bandages. As she dressed the wound, she asked him, Where did you leave the car, and suddenly confronted him, But in your condition you couldn't have driven the car, or you were already at home when it happened, No, it was on the street when I was stationary at a red light, some person brought me home, the car was left in the next street, Fine, let's go down, wait at the door while I go to find it, where did you put the keys, I don't know, he never gave them back to me, Who's he, The man who brought me home, it was a man, He must have left them somewhere, I'll have a look round, It's pointless searching, he didn't enter the flat, But the keys have to be somewhere, Most likely he forgot, inadvertently took them with him, This was all we needed, Use your keys, then we'll sort it out, Right, let's go, take my hand. The blind man said, If I

have to stay like this, I'd rather be dead, Please, don't talk nonsense, things are bad enough, I'm the one who's blind, not you, you cannot imagine what it's like, The doctor will come up with some remedy, you'll see, I shall see.

They left. Below, in the lobby, his wife switched on the light and whispered in his ear. Wait for me here, if any neighbours should appear speak to them naturally, say you're waiting for me, no one looking at you would ever suspect that you cannot see and besides we don't have to tell people all our business, Yes, but don't be long. His wife went rushing off. No neighbour entered or left. The blind man knew from experience that the stairway would only be lit so long as he could hear the mechanism of the automatic switch, therefore he went on pressing the button whenever there was silence. The light, this light, had been transformed into noise for him. He could not understand why his wife was taking so long to return, the street was nearby, some eighty or a hundred metres, If we delay any longer, the doctor will be gone, he thought to himself. He could not avoid a mechanical gesture, raising his left wrist and lowering his eyes to look at his watch. He pursed his lips as if in sudden pain, and felt deeply grateful that there were no neighbours around at that moment, for there and then, were anyone to have spoken to him, he would have burst into tears. A car stopped in the street, At last, he thought, but then realised that it was not the sound of his car engine, This is a diesel engine, it must be a taxi, he said, pressing once more on the button for the light. His wife came back, flustered and upset, that good Samaritan of yours, that good soul, has taken our car, It isn't possible, you can't have looked properly, Of course I looked properly, there's nothing wrong with my eyesight, these last words came out inadvertently, You told me the car was in the next street, she corrected herself, and it isn't, unless they've left it in some other street, No, no, I'm certain it was left in this street, Well then it has disappeared, In that case, what about the keys, He took advantage of your confusion and distress and robbed us, And to think I didn't want him in the flat for fear he might steal something yet if he had kept me company until you arrived home, he could not have stolen our car, Let's go, we have a taxi waiting, I swear to you that I'd give a year of my life to see this rogue go blind as well. Don't speak so loud, And that they rob him of everything he possesses, He might turn up, Ah, so you think he'll knock on the door tomorrow and say he took the car in a moment of distraction, that he is sorry and inquire if you're feeling better.



They remained silent until they reached the doctor's surgery. She tried not to think about the stolen car, squeezed her husband's hand affectionately, while he, his head lowered so that the driver would not see his eyes through the rear-view mirror, could not stop asking himself how it was possible that such a terrible tragedy should have befallen him, Why me. He could hear the noise of the traffic, the odd loud voice whenever the taxi stopped, it often happens, we are still asleep and external sounds are already penetrating the veil of unconsciousness in which we are still wrapped up, as in a white sheet. As in a white sheet. He shook his head, sighing, his wife gently stroked his cheek, her way of saying, Keep calm, I'm here, and he leaned his head on her shoulder, indifferent to what the driver might think, If you were in my situation and unable to drive any more, he thought childishly, and oblivious of the absurdity of that remark, he congratulated himself amidst his despair that he was still capable of formulating a rational thought. On leaving the taxi, discreetly assisted by his wife, he seemed calm, but on entering the surgery where he was about to learn his fate, he asked his wife in a tremulous whisper, What will I be like when I get out of this place, and he shook his head as if he had given up all hope.

His wife informed the receptionist, I'm the person who rang half an hour ago because of my husband, and the receptionist showed them into a small room where other patients were waiting. There was an old man with a black patch over one eye, a young lad who looked cross-eyed, accompanied by a woman who must be his mother, a girl with dark glasses, two other people without any apparent distinguishing features, but no one who was blind, blind people do not consult an ophthalmologist. The woman guided her husband to an empty chair, and since all the other chairs were occupied, she remained standing beside him, We'll have to wait, she whispered in his ear. He realised why, he had heard the voices of those who were in the waiting-room, now he was assailed by another worry, thinking that the longer the doctor took to examine him, the worse his blindness would become to the point of being incurable. He fidgeted in his chair, restless, he was about to confide his worries to his wife, but just then the door opened and the receptionist said, Will you both come this way, and turning to the other patients, Doctor's orders, this man is an urgent case. The mother of the cross-eyed boy protested that her right was her right, and that she was first and had been waiting for more than an hour. The other patients supported her in a low voice, but not one of them, nor the woman herself, thought it

wise to carry on complaining, in case the doctor should take offence and repay their impertinence by making them wait even longer, as has occurred. The old man with the patch over one eye was magnanimous, Let the poor man go ahead, he's in a much worse state than we are. The blind man did not hear him, they were already going into the doctor's consulting room, and the wife was saying, Many thanks for being so kind, doctor, it's just that my husband, and that said, she paused, because frankly she did not know what had really happened, she only knew that her husband was blind and that their car had been stolen. The doctor said, Please, be seated, and he himself went to help the patient into the chair, and then, touching him on the hand, he spoke to him directly, Now then, tell me what is wrong. The blind man explained that he was in his car, waiting for the red light to change when suddenly he could no longer see, that several people had rushed to his assistance, that an elderly woman, judging from her voice, had said that it was probably a case of nerves, and then a man had accompanied him home because he could not manage on his own, I see everything white, doctor. He said nothing about the stolen car.

The doctor asked him, Has anything like this ever happened to you before, or something similar, No, doctor, I don't even use glasses. And you say it came on all of a sudden, Yes, doctor, Like a light going out, More like a light going on, During the last few days have you felt any difference in your eyesight, No, doctor, Is there, or has there ever been any case of blindness in your family, Among the relatives I've known or have heard discussed, no one, Do you suffer from diabetes, No, doctor, From syphilis, No, doctor. From hypertension of the arteries or the brain cells, I'm not sure about the brain cells, but none of these other things, we have regular medical check-ups at work. Have you taken a sharp knock on the head, today or yesterday, No, doctor, How old are you, Thirty-eight, Fine, let's take a look at these eyes. The blind man opened them wide, as if to facilitate the examination, but the doctor took him by the arm and installed him behind a scanner which anyone with imagination might see as a new version of the confessional, eyes replacing words, and the confessor looking directly into the sinner's soul, Rest your chin here, he advised him, keep your eyes open, and don't move. The woman drew close to her husband, put her hand on his shoulder, and said, This will be sorted out, you'll see. The doctor raised and lowered the binocular system at his side, turned finely adjusted knobs, and began his examination. He could find nothing in the

cornea, nothing in the sclera, nothing in the iris, nothing in the retina, nothing in the lens of the eye, nothing in the luteous macula, nothing in the optic nerve, nothing elsewhere. He pushed the apparatus aside, rubbed his eyes, then carried out a second examination from the start, without speaking, and when he had finished there was a puzzled expression on his face, I cannot find any lesion, your eyes are perfect. The woman joined her hands in a gesture of happiness and exclaimed, Didn't I tell you, didn't I tell you, this can be resolved. Ignoring her, the blind man asked, May I remove my chin, doctor, Of course, forgive me, If my eyes are perfect as you say, why am I blind, For the moment I cannot say, we shall have to carry out more detailed tests, analyses, an ecography, an encephalogram, Do you think it has anything to do with the brain, It's a possibility, but I doubt it. Yet you say you can find nothing wrong with my eyes, That's right, How strange, What I'm trying to say is that if, in fact, you are blind, your blindness at this moment defies explanation, Do you doubt that I am blind, Not at all, the problem is the unusual nature of your case, personally, in all my years in practice, I've never come across anything like it, and I daresay no such case has ever been known in the entire history of ophthalmology, Do you think there is a cure, In principle, since I cannot find lesions of any kind or any congenital malformations, my reply should be in the affirmative, But apparently it is not in the affirmative, Only out of caution, only because I do not want to build up hopes that may turn out to be unjustified, I understand, That's the situation, And is there any treatment I should follow, some remedy or other, For the moment I prefer not to prescribe anything, for it would be like prescribing in the dark. There's an apt expression, observed the blind man. The doctor pretended not to hear, got off the revolving stool on which he had been seated to carry out the examination, and, standing up, he wrote out on his prescription pad the tests and analyses he judged to be necessary. He handed the sheet of paper to the wife, Take this and come back with your husband once you have the results, meanwhile if there should be any change in his condition, telephone me, How much do we owe you, doctor, Pay in reception. He accompanied them to the door, murmured words of reassurance, Let's wait and see, let's wait and see, you mustn't despair, and once they had gone he went into the small bathroom adjoining the consulting room and stared at length into the mirror, What can this be, he murmured. Then he returned to the consulting room,

called out to the receptionist, Send in the next patient. That night the blind man dreamt that he was blind.