Clear Eyesight is a Precious Gift

by June Callwood

On a cool bright fall day in 1985 I drove to Lakefield to have lunch with Margaret Laurence and talk about her cataract surgery. She was elated — and enormously relieved — at the success of the operation and felt her example would comfort and encourage others who were about to undergo eye surgery. We talked at length about her appreciation of her sight, and how this intense awareness of the visual world entered into her books. Margaret Laurence's great themes of loneliness, spiritual quest and compassion were played against backgrounds that she described vividly, lingering over colour like a landscape artist. She was my friend; she was friend to hundreds, who loved her with whole hearts and now miss her most painfully.

[**Editor's Note:** After visiting Margaret Laurence, June Callwood wrote the following City Living column for *The Globe and Mail* (24 October 1985), p. D11.]

In *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence's classic and profoundly theological novel, the narrator is a 47-year-old writer named Morag who has an acute visual sense. When Morag sees something in nature that delights her, a soaring bird for instance, her immediate inclination is to locate in the English language the precise words that will capture the bird so readers can visualize it. "How could that color be caught in words?", Morag anguishes as she watches smoky swallows skimming the river.

The texture of the river's surface fascinates Morag. She thinks one morning when the sun slants over it that it looks the color of liquid bronze. Then she asks herself, "Could that be right? Who had ever seen liquid bronze?" Writing, she concludes, is "a daft profession."

Morag wears glasses. They are so much a part of her that she doesn't feel complete without them. Wakened from sleep, she puts on her glasses to answer the phone. Until she was in her teens she successfully concealed from her family her awareness that her eyes were poor. When she was compelled to wear her first pair of glasses, she was startled to discover that trees had separate leaves and were not a blur of green.

In all matters pertaining to eyesight, Morag and Margaret Laurence, now 59, are the same person. Margaret Laurence was born with a right eye which had only about a third of normal vision. Gratitude for the gift of sight is one of the reasons Morag and Margaret Laurence are reverent in the presence of swallows and the fall of light on water. In school the writer dreaded discovery that she needed glasses. She sat in a front seat in order to see, hazily, what was written on the blackboard and suffered the jeers of classmates who thought her a teacher's toady. If she wore glasses, she thought, no one would marry her.

Last winter Margaret Laurence faced a crisis that she had spared Morag. Her eyesight began to deteriorate rapidly. She could no longer read street signs or recognize people more than a few steps away. In February she learned that the problem was a cataract in her right eye. A surgeon told her it could be removed and an artificial lens implanted.

She read a pamphlet describing the procedure and agreed to have it done in August. She describes her state of mind last summer as sheer terror. "I tried not to think about it at first, but a month before the operation I really panicked. It's done with a local, which is much safer than a general anesthetic of course, but with my imagination, with anyone's imagination, you get a picture of the scalpel coming toward your eye."

She knew that cataract surgery has a success rate of about 97 per cent, but her fears overcame reason; she went into hospital quaking.

"I was pretty calm going into the operating room, however," she grins, "because I was sedated. Then there was a slight prick as the needle went into my face — nothing to it, really — and they put an eyepatch over my left eye. So because my right eye was practically blind I didn't see the scalpel, didn't feel or see anything."

When she returned home the next day, holding her head as still as possible, like someone carrying a precious object, her house was a bower of flowers and her friend, novelist Adele Wiseman, was there to help. Her mood was one of elation, mixed with alarm that she might damage the fragile eye. When she blinked, something foreign was sitting on her eyeball. The thought of a cinder getting in it, or a bit of dust even, was a horror.

She kept close to her home in the graceful village of Lakefield as her eye slowly healed. She was obsessed with the eye's healing process. She had regular checkups, but never enough, she would have been happy to see the doctor every day.

She dealt with her copious mail by means of two form letters explaining she was out of commission. One began Dear Friend and the other Dear Correspondent. A touch typist, she did a bit of work on a memoir she's writing, but had little enthusiasm for it.

About three weeks ago the implant was judged to have settled. She was asked to read an eye-chart, a routine exercise for someone who depends on glasses. "Congratulations," she was told. "When you get your new bifocals, you will have 20-20 vision in your right eye."

The new glasses have arrived. She is dazzled. The flowers on the wallpaper in her kitchen now leap from the wall. The first time she walked her familiar route into the village for her newspapers, the brightness of the morning overwhelmed her senses. She's back at work on a book, doing her first draft in longhand, but no longer is "nose to the paper." She says exultantly, "It's like having new sight."

Her left eye, once the "good" eye, is now the bad one and may also need surgery for a cataract. She isn't the least bothered by the prospect. "I'll tell you," she beams, "I'm just a pretty happy lady."

Morag would find the precise word for it: grateful.