

PART 1: BIG HATCHET



Chapter 1

Starting at Sunrise

Big Hatchet looms in my imagination, a mountain glistening darkly against the desert sky. Lifting my binoculars to my eyes, I see it ahead of me, its broad silhouette topped by a dome and peak. To my right stretch the Little Hatchet Mountains. Between them, far off, shimmering like jewels in the distant sky, are the Sierra Madres of Mexico. I stand in a vast desert basin between these mountain ranges, surrounded by cactus and creosote bush and dust and little else and do not want to leave. This is a story about the day I traveled to Big Hatchet and did not stay long enough. It is also a story about my blindness, and about the particular ways that I see.

I took photographs that day I visited Big Hatchet, as if they would help me remember, or remind me of something hard to grasp. I take them out now, spread them on my desk, and look at them using a strong magnifier. There I am with my guide dog; there's Hannah with our car. There's the tan desert landscape marked by brown scrub, the suggestion of mountains at the horizons. I think I look happy, excited, at peace. What was it that made this place so special to me? What is it about my sight that keeps changing, making each day an unexpected adventure?

The day I visited Big Hatchet was full of reminders of my limited sight. My partner Hannah and I were on a trip in the desert of

southwestern New Mexico. The month was December, winter yet not too cold; clear days, winds, a chill. We had spent the night before in a western-style lodge with high wood ceilings, wood floors, a cavernous yet protected feel. I woke early that morning in the dark thinking about the day to come and about my vision: What would I see? What would I miss? Would I enjoy what I saw?

Before rising, I reached down to touch my guide dog Teela, who lay on a blanket on the floor by my side, tied to the bed with a blue nylon leash. A honey-colored dog, in the dark she was but a mass of fur. Hannah lay next to me in the broad bed. I reached to turn off my alarm before it rang, feeling for it on my bedside table. The room was unfamiliar and I was not sure exactly where on the table I had left my talking clock, or the flashlight I still kept by my side at night but rarely ever used anymore. Since going to guide dog school a few months earlier and realizing that other people moved around in the dark finding things and learning their way, I had stopped using my flashlight and, instead, felt my way as I moved, trying to be more aware of my actions physically. I took pride that just the night before I had braved getting out of bed and walking into the bathroom without a flashlight, feeling with my hands for the wall, the door, the light switch inside the adjacent room.

This morning, sunlight was just beginning to seep at the edges of the heavy curtains that hung on the side bedroom windows. I stepped over Teela. I must have given Hannah a brief kiss, as I do every morning when I wake and she is still sleeping, to let her know that I am getting up. "Stay," I said to my dog as I stepped toward the foot of the bed, moving my feet carefully and feeling in front of me with my hands so that I would not bump into the wooden bench at the foot of the bed where I had placed our bags. I wanted to get to the window quickly. I wanted to look out and see if the sun had risen yet and if there was color in the sky.

At the window, I felt behind the curtain and found a set of wooden shutters, then lifted and pulled them out so that I could

put my head in close to the glass and take a look. The brightness of the very early morning outside startled me. The sun was on its way but had not yet risen. In the near distance, behind a tree ahead to my left, a patch of rose-red color stood out. I felt overjoyed. I am always glad when I can still see the color of a sunrise.

But the color was covered with a murky coating. I wondered if this was caused by a screen outside the window or if it was the result of darkness within my eyes. Closing the shutters, I stepped toward the back door of our room to go to an outside patio for a better look. There, scarcely dressed, surrounded by pine trees, I stood shivering in the morning cold and looked into the distance. I hoped the red sunrise would now be a brighter, truer color. It was. But my angle of view, different than inside, was not as good. The color began to turn from deep rose-red to orange.

I ran back into the room and searched in my bags for my camera and took it outside, but it had no film. By this time the deep red color was moving to the right and becoming a lighter orange. The moment of the most intense color had passed. I watched the orange spread across the sky. Back inside, I watched again at the window, then closed the curtain. I turned away, disappointed that I had not been able to see the sunrise better or to save it forever in a photograph. At the same time, I felt happy about what I had seen. It was like a good omen, presaging the day to come.

As I packed the car for our trip south that morning, I carried our bags out the back door, stepping cautiously over barely visible rocks that marked the edges of paths. I played Frisbee with Teela in the circular gravel drive in front of the lodge, sometimes throwing her cloth disc off into the desert scrub accidentally and hoping she would not come back covered with cactus pricklers. I wanted to tire her before putting her into the car for our day's trip. After playing, now harnessed up, Teela led me to the kitchen in the dark lodge to pick up a lunch I had requested. We would stop for Hannah's lunch on the way because she was allergic to the food the lodge had prepared. Outside, the sun felt warm and the

air cool, and there was a brisk wind, but we would be descending in altitude later and I did not think the chill would be a problem. Or I hoped not. I was trying, in my mind, to make everything perfect, hoping the day would turn out well.

As we drove off in the car—Hannah beside me at the wheel, Teela on the back seat—I watched through the window the bare branches of trees by the roadside outlined brightly against the blue winter desert sky. The leafless trees and the shrubs beside them glowed white and a light straw-colored tan, looking delicate and lacy, lending a bare but not austere feeling to the landscape. It was magical, a finely sculpted look—the surrounding fields seen through iridescent bare branches. As I watched, I sensed but did not see the cold. I felt that winter here in the southern high desert was the best time, a time when individuals stand out, when I could stand out against the landscape and not feel overrun by others or by a thickness of activity. The black asphalt road ahead shimmered in the morning sunlight, the roadside marked by those interlaced bare branches of trees and brush through which the sun glistened as if through snow. I noted my surroundings with a grateful eye.

I was not wearing sunglasses as we drove, although the sun was bright and at an angle. I did not need them because the darkness within my eyes provided protection as I peered out as if through inner streaked glass. Because of my impaired vision, I had a sense of blurriness and a sense that things were missing. The scenery seemed to pass by very quickly. I was not sure what I would be able to see as we drove on or when we reached our destination. So I relished and took joy at each step, in almost everything I now saw—the road, the sky, the low juniper and piñon pines sitting like green Buddhas on dry, wheat-like fields. These different pieces of the landscape entered my vision as if by surprise and suddenly I saw them.

We turned south at a junction in Silver City and headed toward Lordsburg. The road began to climb in a gradual ascent. Soon on both sides of the road were low rock formations, no trees; the

vista became broader, the road wider, the vast sky overhead seemed lower, as if everywhere touching the ground. Objects were farther away and harder for me to see, more blurred. I asked Hannah what colors the rock banks by the roadside were; they were pink as well as sandy brown, she told me.

I expected that at one point we would ascend to the highest elevation at the back of the Burro Mountains through which we were now passing. But I could not tell exactly where. I strained to see—looking for a sign to a fire road, FR 851, that would tell me when we had reached the vicinity of Burro Peak, but I could not find it. I had seen this fire road on a map the night before while planning our route, though even then I was straining to see, holding the map an inch from my eye, staring through my magnifier at the letters marking towns and roads until these images blurred away. FR 851 kept blurring out of my vision on the map, just as the real fire road now blurred off into the desert sandstone. I am still not sure where Burro Peak was, but somewhere I thought it was there against the sky—a low rocky peak, part of a low mountain range or high mesa.

A few times, I took out my binoculars to try to see the colors of the rocks next to the highway, but I could not focus well because of the speed of the car. Instead, I took out my camera to look through the telephoto lens. The image became very small. Finally, I sat back next to Hannah and let the scenery pass by—the sandy colors, the bright blue overhead. I thought about the blurriness around me and wondered whether I would, in fact, prefer a clearer view. I thought about my many efforts at sight.

“There’s still a pull toward the left,” Hannah said softly, interrupting my reverie as we drove on. She had noticed the car veering slightly left when she braked and sometimes while steering.

“Let’s check on it when we stop for gas in Lordsburg,” I offered, wanting to take care of something. Because I do not drive, I often want to do the extras while Hannah is driving so that I will feel useful. We were descending now and soon began traversing

a broad desert plain. Lordsburg lay ahead of us, dotting the horizon. Hannah, who hates to get lost, began searching for our exit. “Do you know which one it is?” she asked.

“Describe them to me,” I said.

“One exit goes to the right and the other circles over to the left.”

I fumbled for my camera to use it to try to find the exit.

“There’s no time,” Hannah said, turning left.

“Where does the right road go?” I asked.

“Right goes to Arizona.” She pointed to a haze in the distance suggestive of mountains.

Turning left, we began circling, winding down beneath the highway and then beneath an overhead railroad trestle, going from bright daylight into a cavernous maze that felt underground. Turned around, we then headed up again and into the sun and dust and toward the sky and signs high on poles in the air. We were deposited off onto the half-shaded morning streets of a half-vacant, dusty old western town that time was passing by.

I liked Lordsburg immediately, perhaps because the town was small and surrounded by an emptiness that allowed me to imagine what I wished—a space to grow, a promise, a separation from intrusion, a new start. This must be the old downtown, I thought, as we drove past garages for farm machinery and truck repair, not what we needed for our car. Then I began seeing storefronts, gray buildings standing tall on the shady side of the street. They held secrets to the town, I thought. I could not see beyond their reflective glass fronts, so I asked Hannah, “What do the signs say? What’s in the stores?”

“That one’s empty,” she said. “That’s an old hotel. I don’t know if it’s still in use.” “That’s an art store or community center. It’s closed.” “The sign for that one says ‘Pharmacy.’”

I saw only a row of reflective gray glass storefronts running for two or three blocks on one side of a broad empty street paralleling the railroad tracks. The stores sat a foot and a half up on

the high sidewalks characteristic of these western desert towns, emphasizing their tallness. I kept wishing there would be a store that I wanted to go into, a reason to stop, but it was morning and we needed to find gas.

The road soon widened, the space stretched out and we moved with speed until a gas station appeared. I got out of the car and walked across the asphalt lot to a glassed-in office, feeling imbalanced because I had not taken Teela or my white cane. I wondered if I looked drunk or blind as I walked, though probably, I thought, nobody seeing me would notice anything unusual. Opening the door to the gas station office, I asked the woman attendant sitting at a desk if she had a tire gauge. I wanted to measure the air pressure in our tires to see if an unevenness was causing the pull Hannah had mentioned.

“I have a gauge,” the woman said, “but I don’t have air. It won’t help you much.” She paused. I stood thinking. The woman spoke softly with a Texas drawl that was hard for me to understand.

“Do you know who would have air?” I asked her.

“You might try Gentry’s.”

“How do I get there?”

“Go back the way you came. Did you come on 10? Then get off when you see the sign for the Best Western. He should have air.”

The woman wore glasses and had her hair pulled back and she seemed to me of retirement age, so I wondered why she was working here, and I thought she finally smiled. Everything felt still in that little glass office.

“Thank you,” I said, hoping to remember the directions and praying they would make sense to Hannah.

I took the step down carefully from the office onto the asphalt, not wanting to trip, aware of missing my dog. Why hadn’t I brought her? I can easily forget I may need her, that I will do better with her aid.

“Do you know which way she means?” I asked Hannah back at the car when I gave her the directions.

“Yes,” she said.

I climbed in beside her. The car we were driving was a small sports utility vehicle. It handled like a regular car but put us high up, and since we have a sedan at home, the experience of traveling in the desert in an SUV is exciting for Hannah and me. It was not quite “way out west on horseback,” but something close. This was the second trip on which we had rented a sports utility vehicle, and I was pleased that Hannah liked driving it. The upright seat supported her weak back and it enabled me to see out in a panoramic way—with windows four-square all around providing a view that felt exhilarating, extending the limits of my sight.

I could not fully follow how Hannah got us back onto the highway, then off again, under the railroad trestle, up onto streets and around a block to Gentry’s gas station. She pulled up to a center island where I got out and walked over to a cubicle in which a man stood at a window collecting money.

“Do you have air and a tire gauge?” I asked him.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I have air, but no gauge. I lent it to a fellow the other night and he never gave it back. You might try the Exxon.”

“Where’s that?”

“Over there.” He pointed toward a blur.

“How do I get there?”

“You go back to the sign for the motel and you turn left.” He seemed to think no further explanation was necessary.

I was very aware that I did not see well enough to feel confident about the directions. I felt confused and amazed that in this scattered town there were so many places to get lost obtaining gas. I also noticed that people kept giving me directions in terms of the location of billboards.

At the third gas station, the wind was blowing fiercely, carrying dust and oily gas station grit. The air felt cold as I walked over

to another, dirtier, glassed-in office. The attendant, a small older man, handed me a gauge and pointed toward what I assumed was an air hose on a fueling island.

“I’ll do it,” Hannah said when I returned to the car, taking the gauge from my hand. “Get inside with Teela and keep warm,” she told me. Teela’s nose was now pressed against the glass of the back window. She was standing on the seat looking out at me longingly as if we should not have this glass between us.

I assumed Hannah felt it would be easier for her to test and fill the tires than it would be for me, since I would not be able to see the markings on the gauge or the little valves on the tires where the air hose should attach. I knew I could fill the tires by feeling for the valves and by using my magnifier. But I conceded. I stood and watched Hannah go and get the air hose from on the ground somewhere out of my sight, pull it over and start to fill the tires. She then re-measured the first tire with the gauge. The pressure was less than it had been before. “It’s taking the air out,” she said.

I went back to the office to tell the station attendant that the air hose wasn’t working. He began to argue, then mumbled something in Spanish that I did not comprehend.

“Come out,” I gestured. “Would you try it?”

He knelt down next to the right front tire, attached the hose. “It’s not working,” he said. Then he went back inside.

A while later, he returned to tell us that the compressor wasn’t working. It had been turned off the night before and hadn’t been turned back on yet. We should wait for fifteen minutes and let it warm up and then we could fill the tires.

Hannah did most of the work. I assisted. I watched her kneel down with one knee on the ground while attaching the air hose. I was worried that the knee of her light-colored pants would get dirty, but she did not seem to mind. I kept thinking about how I used to be the one to fill our tires, but now I just helped. With my hands, I felt for and found the air valves on the tires, invisible up under the body of the car. And I gave advice.

We filled the tank up with gas. When we drove off, although the air pressure in the tires was now even, the pull to the left was still discernable, so I figured it was probably built into the car. The theme of things “not working” struck me. I thought it must be typical of Lordsburg—having to go to three stations to get air, the wind blowing, things broken and missing. I thought, too, about my eyesight and about how parts of it are not working—how part of what I see is always missing, while other aspects stand out in remarkable detail, such as the delicacy of bare trees in the morning sunlight, or the contours of the ground in three different gas stations. Perhaps I was more detail-oriented now because of my broken eyesight. The objects I still could see meant more to me than before and I seemed to need to know more specifics about my surroundings in order to get my bearings.

“I can see it from here,” Hannah said suddenly.

I looked out the car window and up at a billboard for the Best Western Skies Motel and for Kranberry’s Family Restaurant. The restaurant stood a stone’s throw from the billboard, next to the Best Western, and diagonally across from the Exxon. It was a low, modern building with broad windows. We pulled into the parking lot where I put Teela’s harness on her, and with her guiding me, I walked with Hannah up the pathway to the front door, trying not to feel conspicuous. Inside, while Hannah ordered a takeout lunch, I stepped over to a mock covered wagon that held a display of tourist items—decorative tiles, postcards, ceramic red chiles. I handled several black baseball hats that said “Kranberry’s,” thinking, would I wear one? Would people then ask, “Where’s Kranberry’s?” How would I answer, how would I explain my travels?

Hannah came over and we entered the restrooms. As I exited, I walked out past startled women and children who exclaimed loudly upon seeing that a dog had suddenly appeared from within a bathroom stall. I waited for Hannah in a narrow hallway outside the restrooms where paintings hung on the walls—small framed watercolors and oils, miniature landscapes, many of them in blue

tones. They hung against a backdrop of striped green wallpaper. I walked up to one painting, then another, and put my head close to the glass to see the features—a tree, a distant mountain—then I stepped back. I took out my small round pocket magnifier to help me see better, holding it up close to the paintings, but then the watercolors blurred into indefinable forms. A label said this was an exhibit of the Art Society of Lordsburg. I marveled that an art show was hanging here on walls outside restrooms next to an ice machine in a restaurant off the interstate.

Hannah soon joined me looking at the paintings; she described some of them to me, then she went to pick up her lunch. While she paid at the desk, I sat on a bench in the lobby near the front door, Teela beside me. A woman came over, and seeing Teela, began talking to me about her dog who had died; she was not over it. As I listened to her, I thought I should get used to people telling me about their dogs. Having Teela with me stirred their feelings. There was much for me to learn about traveling with a guide dog—I definitely felt more accessible in public; people talked to me more. Hannah returned with her lunch in a box. She checked out the covered wagon. A CD by a local woman caught her eye, a collection of “Cowboy Songs.” Before purchasing it, she made sure it had at least one song about a cowgirl. With music to accompany our drive, we were on our way.

As we left Lordsburg, the landscape began to change, only hinting at what lay ahead. We were now driving farther south, and just outside town, we passed what seemed to me to be a lake or large pond. How could water be here? I wondered. Was it water or a dry basin that looked like water? Hannah was concentrating on her driving in order not to get lost. “I’ll look later,” she said when I asked her to be my eyes.

I had a vague feeling that I had read that birds could sometimes be sighted on the flats south of Lordsburg, and perhaps the water was the reason. I took out my camera to look through the telephoto, but I could not figure out what I was seeing.

As we drove on, the water receded into plains and a new kind of flatness. The earth stretched white in all directions, the sun glistening off it, enveloping us in a hazy light. The mountains in the distance seemed far away, buildings infrequent. This was arid ranchland, or what once was ranchland—sparse vegetation, almost bare. Things were lying around, but nothing seemed clearly to announce what it was. A barbed wire fence extended indefinitely, a row of trees faded into dry fields, a sign saying “Hill” was followed by a slight incline. Occasional signs announced upcoming towns that you could drive through without knowing that you had missed them.

“Let’s stop,” I said to Hannah, seeing several buildings and a dirt parking lot beside the road, along with signs Hannah read for a post office and a cafe. I wanted to get out and see my surroundings close up, feel the ground at my feet, gain my bearings. I hoped perhaps to go into the cafe for a sense of local color, get a lunch, though I already had one, buy something, as if that would tell me I was here.

A small, hand-painted sign above the door to a modest rear building read, “Cafe and General Store.” As I entered guided by Teela, who followed Hannah, a wooden screen door knocked shut behind me. I stepped past several long tables covered with white oilcloths, past posters announcing an upcoming potluck. The smell of fried cooking grease hung in the air. A window in back of the one-room cafe let in a few streams of sunlight. No one seemed to be around.

I knew the burnt grease odor would bother Hannah, that she would want to leave quickly, but the odor made me wish to stay, to order an item of local cooking, maybe Mexican. I walked over to investigate a glassed-in counter in the back of the room, thinking this must be the general store component. I put my eyes down close to the glass to try to see the items on the shelves beneath it, but I could not make them out—some small boxes that looked blurred. I wondered if there was another room next door but that was probably the post office.

A woman appeared and stepped behind the counter to wait on me. I asked her if there might be another general store nearby, as if to explain my close scrutiny of the items. Then a man, a local, I think, walked in and began talking with the woman. I wished, right then, that I was a local. I wished I could see the items in the display. I wished Hannah did not have allergies and get headaches from closed-in burnt grease. I wished I could sit at a table and order food and take in the place and pretend, just pretend for a while that I lived here—in the middle of seemingly nothing where the land stretches, where towns exist but are not visible, where things glow white and shimmering tan, and far away are Mexico, Arizona, industries and railroads. Clearly now, I felt, we were on our way; we were leaving family restaurants for the south, for new vistas and possibilities.

The name of the town we had stopped in was Animas, for “spirit.” I liked the poetic sound of the name and the sense of a spirit matching the landscape and my expansive hopes for my own life. Some miles later, we passed through another small town, which also had a cafe, but we did not stop. I wanted to, but there were two of us, and how often could I walk into a murky interior looking for something I might not find, that perhaps was not even there—good food, recognition, a community life in which I could feel special and enjoy a new comfort in being, perhaps a new reconciling with my blindness.

Before we left the Animas Cafe, the woman at the counter had given me directions to where there might be another general store. She pointed toward the front door and mentioned a hill ahead and a road to the left that climbed a little and said there was a store over there, if they were open or still in business.

As we drove on now, I kept looking for the hill and the road up, though I never saw it. Hannah seemed to think she did, but the landscape was hazy, glistening as if with wet sun, and things were not what they seemed.

