



Chapter 10

Luminarias

I finally saw luminarias—at night in the dark as we pulled the car into the lot behind where Martha’s Black Dog Cafe used to be. I had been to the plaza in the small town of Socorro before, but now it was very dark and my vision was limited in ways I might not be aware of until I actually confronted them, until I got outside and began to walk in the blackness among the small lights.

From the car I saw a row of glowing candles in brown paper bags lining the sidewalks of a narrow street. I was excited. I had not been sure I would be able to see these glowing bags on the ground in the night; their light was muted compared with the brightness of electric Christmas lights. But there were so many, and they were festive; ahead they seemed to dot the park-like plaza, spreading along winding paths, rising on steps and on the gentle slope of a hill. They glowed from side streets in front of illuminated stores surrounding the square plaza. Music wafted from somewhere. People walked about. I was happy.

Hannah and I were on a return trip to New Mexico. Each winter when we have visited in recent years, I try to figure out what is happening to my sight. The stark desert landscape, the vast sweeps, the unfamiliar places, particularly at night, all call attention to my vision in ways I later reflect upon. I hoped this trip, like the one we took two years ago, when Teela was first with me,

would be special. At the same time, I feared that either my eyesight would fail me more completely, or the world would somehow fail me and suddenly grow dim—no bright spots, no new adventures, no uplifting experiences or final satisfactions.

That night I spent wandering among the luminarias has become for me much more than a memory of small bags of light glowing beautifully in the darkness and a testament to the transitory nature of my sight. It is a recognition of the art that goes into seeing; a picture, as well, of my inner hesitance, my self-consciousness and self-doubts; a picture of the detailed efforts it takes me to comprehend how to move safely and with assistance; a picture especially of the work required to reconcile how I am looked at by others with how, in turn, I must look at myself; a picture of the thought processes that go into learning to step carefully, and into recognizing what I see and allowing myself to enjoy it.

Life slows down when one is blind. Pictures take time to compose. Small moments assume great importance when new sight is needed. My night among the luminarias marked the beginning of a trip of return and recovery, during which I would confront the many ambiguities of my blindness, seeking new resolutions. On that cool December evening, as the luminarias on a small town plaza beckoned me to come close, challenging me to see them again, and to see them differently, I tried to grasp what I could find in their light.

When Hannah, Teela, and I arrived at the festive plaza, it was not even Christmas yet, two weeks before, but the town was having its celebration. I pointed to what I thought was a parking space as Hannah pulled the car into the dark lot. “That’s not a space,” she said to me, “but there’s one over there.” Hannah is always saying things like that, telling me that something I think I recognize is actually something else. She tells me gently, not reprimanding me, but with a kind of guidance, lest I be mistaken and forever have a wrong image in my mind.

She parked and turned off the car engine. I got out and came

around to the back door to let Teela out and to put on my gloves and a scarf to keep off the cold. I thought about taking my camera because I wanted to have pictures of the luminarias glowing with their strange delicate brightness, but I decided against it since this was only my first sighting of luminarias on this trip and surely there would be more. As it turned out, this was the best sighting—more candles, close to me, spread around so I could walk among them. There would never again be an opportunity to take this same picture. But I did not know that on this night. I assumed magical displays of lights would be everywhere. It's that way with magic, and with sight; you know you've had it only when it's gone. Now I only have this picture in my mind—a dark background aglow with small square lights and me walking among them, starting and stopping, looking down to take each lantern in—to be sure they were there, to remember them.

Leaving the car, I began to walk forward quickly with Teela to look closely at the first luminaria I saw. Then I started to trip, stumbling on a crack in the sidewalk I had not seen in the dark. "Slow down," Hannah called to me from behind.

As I looked at the candle nestled in sand within the luminaria at my feet and up at the glimmering lights ahead on the plaza, I missed my camera. I thought about going back for it, but I had not yet loaded the film. I also thought it would look strange—a woman wearing glasses, being led by a guide dog, stopping here and there in the dark to look through a lens, taking pictures that might flash, getting down close to the ground to stare into the small bags of light. If I had taken my camera, I would have those pictures I now desire. But I am self-conscious, already feeling enough of a public spectacle. People look at me because I am with a guide dog. I did not want to call further attention to myself.

Later that evening as we walked up close to children singing in the far end of the plaza, I saw a man with a camera taking pictures of his kids. I could be taking pictures too, I thought. His camera in the dark did not look strange. But of course, I was over-

looking the fact that if I peered through my camera lens in the night, I would not see much, if anything at all. The camera makes visual images darker, and small, and I am not adept at nighttime photography.

So I am left with images without film, images in my mind, images detailed perhaps all the more precisely because I have no external visual record of them, and perhaps also because I now have less skill with my eyes than with my words. I have grown more desirous of creating my own pictures since I have begun to lose my vision—more intent on keeping my images and more fearful of losing them.

The last time we visited the town of Socorro was a year ago on Christmas Eve. The year before that, I had taken delight in seeing electric Christmas lights while driving around this town, and I had longed to see luminarias—not the plastic kind, but the real ones, usually set out only on Christmas Eve. Hannah had said, “I’ll take you to see them next time.” And she had. It had snowed last year, so the little bags sat on the plaza in the scattered whiteness of the snow, the ice glinting all around them. They looked picturesque. I was touched that Hannah took me to see them but also disappointed because the candlelit bags looked dim to me, less striking than I had expected. Because the weather was bitter cold last year, I did not stay outside for long walking among the small lanterns. I got back in the car and we drove around the edges of the plaza peering at them. Through the tinted car windows, the luminarias looked even more faded; and farther away, they were harder for me to see.

Hannah then drove us up a road that climbed the side of the mountain behind the plaza, so I could view luminarias lining houses and yards there, and perhaps see them better. She pointed out to me that the mountain in the background was white, and covered with snow, and that above it was a sliver of a moon. But I could not see the snow on the mountain or the moon in the distance, and the luminarias around the homes looked dim there too.

Since I had been disappointed last year, this year I prepared myself. I planned to get as close to the candlelit bags as I could and to give myself many possibilities to see them on our trip. I wanted to take my disappointment and convert it to a satisfaction. Maybe I would light some luminarias of my own or stand close and watch people putting them out in front of their homes. I had called the local Chamber of Commerce to ask if there would be a luminaria display before Christmas, and now, here we were.

AMONG THE LIGHTS

I began to walk quickly forward with Hannah, Teela guiding me toward the excitement ahead on the plaza. We passed lighted storefronts, warmth emanating from inside them, with pictures hanging on their walls. This night was a combination “arts and crafts crawl” and luminaria display. The stores stayed open late, featuring works of local artists. Walking down the street, we stopped first into a bicycle shop that displayed crafted woodwork and framed photos, with refreshments set out on a table inside. Someone recommended the black bean salsa dip and I had some, a first taste of the red chile flavors I so like. I switched Teela’s leash to my left hand so I could reach for a corn chip and sample the smokey flavored dip, which made Teela start to get excited and move around, so I quickly shoved the food in my mouth and switched her back. “Would you like some wine?” Hannah asked. I did but was afraid I would not be able to juggle it well while holding Teela, and what if I got drunk and began to weave on my feet as I walked with her in the dark among the luminarias? I couldn’t risk it. I had some more salsa, and we headed back out into the cold. It was not bitter cold like last year, but cold enough to be in the spirit of the season, cold enough to make the shimmering bags of candlelight feel protective—these little fires all around threw a warmth disproportionate to their tiny size.

Hannah stood with me at the curb in front of the bicycle shop before crossing the street to the plaza. “Be careful,” she said.