

PART 3: SIGHTED AND BLIND



Chapter 7

Navigating Duality

I am blind and I am sighted. I am often not sure of what I see. Do I see what is there? The images look so small. People on the street at any distance seem tiny to me, with thin legs that disappear in the shimmering sun. Often the people themselves disappear if they are not in my direct line of sight. Cars on the street also look tiny, like toy cars in the distance. Up close, however, they appear so large that I must take them in piece by piece: a part of a fender, the blue oval emblem that says “Ford.” Though I can no longer read the brand names, I still play the game of guessing at the makes of the cars as Teela pulls me quickly past them.

Walking down the street with her, and everywhere I go, I feel self-conscious. People see me with a large dog and they notice me. Sometimes they think I am blind and being guided by Teela. Other times they think I am sighted and training her for someone else who is blind. The uncertainty of how I am perceived makes me anxious. I must emotionally navigate my identity at the same time as I physically navigate my route.

The contradictions abound for me. For instance, I do not see well, yet I keep trying to; I look around intently with my eyes. My vision is impaired, yet I enjoy my sight. When I step outside with Teela and I am wearing my dark glasses, I am overjoyed by the images that come in through the tinted lenses by bright contrast—

a white edge of a house, a light tree trunk reflecting the sunlight, a set of large bright letters against the dark background of a store awning. Although the letters look bent and broken to me, and as if they are underwater, glowing with a phosphorescent shine, to me they are beautiful, magical. I stare at these letters and I think, “I can see.” It takes many internal steps, much going over in my mind, to remind myself that I take such joy in seeing the letters precisely because I can’t see, or can’t see well. Objects that have some clarity come through the hazy confusion in front of my eyes and make me happy.

As I walk farther down the street, I pause to stare at a stop sign ahead. The letters on the sign’s red background waver and disappear, then come into focus; I study them with my right eye, then my left, testing my vision, as I often do—trying to determine the exact state of my sight. Which eye is better now? Which sees with more of an edge? Has my vision changed since I last looked at this sign? I continue walking past pieces of sharpness, sections of buildings and streets. I know what I am looking at generally, but if I did not, it would seem a jumble.

Traveling in my familiar neighborhood in San Francisco, much like my more distant travels, is like being in a movie that I perceive in separate frames that do not flow smoothly into one another. In this choppy movie, I focus on what lies straight ahead, trying to make it out. A small figure down the street may be a child or a dog. I tilt my head, using the different parts of my eyesight in an attempt to bring the figure into focus, though it will only become clear closer up. Teela, stopping, points her nose toward a square object farther away. Odd-looking at a distance, it turns out to be a wheelchair that someone has left on the sidewalk. I stand beside it and examine the arm rests and wheels, taking them in one section at a time, much as I do when using a magnifier. Maybe I’ll remember what a wheelchair looks like from a distance when I next see one. I pass the child and I wonder why I thought it was a dog. Why am I always seeing dogs? Perhaps because I overlay

new objects with memories of familiar ones, making assumptions until I find out what is really there.

As I walk, deciphering the world—guessing at and identifying the different pieces of it—I am constantly thinking about what I see, and by this I mean not only what an object is, but what it means to see it. Does seeing a child the way I do, or seeing a person's thin shimmering legs in the distance, mean I am sighted? Does it mean I am blind? What does what I see say about who I am? Questions about my identity always lurk for me behind the more practical questions about what lies before me.

I see better now than I did a year and a half ago when the cataracts on my eyes had become extremely dark. Now that the cataracts have been removed, my surroundings are often so bright that I have to wear dark glasses when outside, where I used to rely on the darkness within my eyes shielding me from glare and the pain of too much light. Because I see better now, I often forget that I don't see. I stand in a supermarket and look up at the big letters on signs high in the air above the aisles, marveling that I see them, and then I turn and bump into a person at my side, invisible to me because she is lost in a blind spot in my peripheral vision. A few days ago, I was in front of my house playing Frisbee with Teela. I threw her floppy cloth disc up the sidewalk for her to retrieve and it hit a woman walking toward me, whom I did not see coming for she, too, was lost in a blind spot. More startled than she was, I apologized, and I vowed internally to be more careful in the future—a vow I often take when there is a mishap. I will cross a street, not see a car coming toward me, feel lucky it stops, then vow to be more careful—to listen as well as look in all directions next time. I'll walk into a tree branch overhanging the sidewalk and vow to remember where it is for the future. Or I will trip on a crack, then promise myself to remember it. I show Teela the broken piece of sidewalk so she will stop and alert me next time, but I also need to map the crack's location in my mind.

As Teela guides me along sidewalks, she halts at the curbs.

They look brighter to me now than they used to, but I still cannot make out the depth of a curb or the edges of steps. On some days, Teela and I climb a steep flight of stairs on a hillside behind my house. Coming down the stairs, even with her guiding me, I wobble, feeling uncertain of my balance because I can't see the edges of the steps. I fear I'll tumble down them. I have read that blind people do better navigating stairs entirely by feel; it's sight combined with blindness that makes the stairs confusing. But unfortunately, I am still holding onto my old habits of sight. It's easy to feel that my vision is reassuring, that my sight is a good guide, even when it is not.

I know I am not a good judge of distances and speed. When I sit in the car beside Hannah while she is driving, the forward movement of our car often frightens me. Other cars passing us on the highway from the sides seem to come out of nowhere. I cringe and pull back, suddenly seeing them. Will I be hit? I am always expecting an accident, and not only when in the car, but in all of my movements—especially in the intimate surroundings of our home. In our kitchen, for instance, I am very careful with knives and scissors. As I stand at a counter cutting a slice of bread, I must watch out not only for my fingers, but also for one of our cats, Shadow, who likes to leap from counter to counter. I fear she will fly through the air and land on the knife and I won't see her coming. I have already had a few close calls with her. Thus I put knives away quickly and always hold them point down. I sometimes tell Hannah to do the same, forgetting that she can see the cat.

Hannah and I have worked out several maneuvers for when we are both moving about in our kitchen—to compensate for my lack of sight, and so that I will not bump into her. "I'm coming behind you," she will say to me, "I'm on your right. I am going toward the cabinet."

I will often say the same to her when I move, because I am not sure she will be aware that I don't see her. I will be moving in a way that does not take into account that she is there, and I may

move too quickly. What if she moves at the same time? I know I need to move slowly, but I don't always remember to do so. I keep attempting my old habits of speed as if quickness is a sign of ability, when now just the opposite is so for me.

"Cat on your right," Hannah will call out to me while we are making dinner, thinking I don't see the cat sneaking up. "She's on the counter about to take your food."

But then sometimes I will see the cat. "I see her," I'll tell Hannah.

"I don't always know what you see," she says, feeling confused and a bit hurt by my rejection of her help. She's confused and hurt, as I so often am, because my sight comes and goes.

In our house, I often trip over one of the dogs or one of our three cats. I confuse the pets, too, because sometimes I see them and sometimes I don't. And always I think that I *should* see them. I should remember to watch out, to think about where they are, to step carefully. In addition to Teela, we have a small black poodle, Esperanza, and our cat Shadow is gray. Both pets are harder for me to see than Teela, with her light golden fur. Our two other cats are easier for me to notice because they have white feet and white bellies. Still I wonder, why can't I see them all, even the dark ones? Why can't I remember where they are likely to be and step around them, "seeing" with my nonvisual awareness, my sense of their habits, as blind people learn to do?

Clearly, whether I am at home or out, I am preoccupied by my sight. Do I see? Don't I see? Will I be safe as I move? Will others be safe around me? Is my vision better now than it was before? Or worse? Will it change again? I somehow believe that I am what I see, and that my value is determined by my sight. I worry that I will have less worth if I see better, and also if I see worse. Why these worries? Why must I so often remind myself that I don't see?

I am back in the supermarket, where I walk over to an aisle and stand for a long time staring at the shelves, searching for col-

ors and shapes that are familiar. Taking out my pocket magnifier, I lean in close to one shelf to check a price, which I can't quite make out; there's not enough light for using my magnifier. I pick up a jar of salsa and hold it close to my right eye, looking through the small round plastic lens at the ingredients, trying to catch the light and to angle the lens carefully with the curve of the jar so the letters don't become distorted. It's a lot of work for a small item, yet this process has become natural to me.

Still, I feel self-conscious—for spending so much time and for taking up so much space in the aisle as Teela lies beside me on the floor and I try to figure out what I want to buy. Standing with jar in hand, I feel I should not be here deciphering this label, or trying to. A blind woman should have someone with her, or ask for a store clerk's help. But I have taken myself here. I am using my sight. I feel caught in the world of the sighted acting like I'm blind. And I wonder, am I acting? Am I sighted, or blind? How can I be both? The answer may be clear to others, but it's rarely clear to me. In part, this is because of the overwhelming power of my sight and the complex hiddenness of what I don't see. I find it hard to explain to others what it is like for me, and hard to see it myself. I find it hard to believe that I am blind when the standard for making that statement is so often assumed to be black and white: a person is blind or not, sees or does not, fits completely in one category or the other. Yet I see and do not see; it's very individual: I feel that no one else sees quite what I do, or misses out on exactly what I am blind to. My loss of sight has given me a new appreciation for the saying that we each see differently; it has given me a sense of the profound isolation involved in individual perception.

Although I often don't see, or I see something that quickly disappears or is distorted, I still think I should be able to do things as I did them before when fully sighted. I should be able to walk without a dog or a cane, drive a car, read without magnifiers, manage the light and somehow discern objects better. "Don't give up," I tell myself. "Don't ask someone else, don't act blind." At the

same time, I know I try, in many ways, to act blind. I walk down the hallway in my house at night without turning on the lights, and instead touch the walls in the dark and feel for the openness of doorways. I step carefully through our unlighted living room, similarly feeling my way, touching the edges of tables, chairs, and lampshades. Reaching the front window, I draw the drapes against a world I can't see. In the morning, in the kitchen, I reach into a darkened cabinet, searching for a jar by feel. I often find something in this cabinet, or in Hannah's closet, that she won't be able to find by sight.

When returning from an afternoon out walking with Teela, I usually enter our house through the basement, but I don't flip on the light switch. Instead, I put my hand in front of me to feel for obstacles, and I walk slowly. As I feel my way, I tell myself I am preparing for the future when I lose more sight, and for places where there are no lights, or where the darkness is unfamiliar. I tell myself I am developing skills and good habits that will serve me later when I will need them.

Harder for me to comprehend is that I am navigating in tactile ways for the present—because my surroundings are often dim to me, and because I feel an increase in confidence when I find my way by feel rather than by my limited sight or by straining to see. When I stop relying on my vision, I feel relief. I feel prepared and capable as I walk through my dark basement or hallway without bumping into things and I fear reverting back to my older, more helpless habits, my sighted ways.

I often concentrate so determinedly on finding my way as a blind person that I become lost in the moment. I stand at the front door to the basement and take out my keys, feeling for their edges to know which to use, then I put my finger on the door lock to find the keyhole—focusing on my touch, a substitute for what once was my sight. Inside, passing the light switch, I concentrate on remembering where the garbage cans stand and where the edge of the rug begins. I touch the dryer as I pass it, feeling the coolness

of the metal, pleased to have gotten this far without veering off course; then I climb the back stairs blindly to the kitchen, where I greet my small dog by bending to touch her before I see her. Entering the dining room, I touch a light bulb to see if the table lamp has been left on. It is daylight and I would have to strain to see the difference between the bulb's glow and the natural light. I don't want to try to see; I just touch.

I have discovered that I like to touch the textures of my surroundings. In my yard, I touch the leaves of the plants; I especially like the shiny feel of new growth. I don't like to wear garden gloves anymore, but to feel the graininess of the earth. I finger the petals of the flowers in my garden even as I wonder, am I touching them because I need to, since my sight is poor, or simply because it is joyful for me? I know I can look at a fuchsia blossom up close and see something, but the flower seems not to mean as much, and to be less fully there, if I don't touch it. The fuchsia has a rubbery outer shell and a crinkly, delicate inner skirt. My pleasure in feeling its texture adds a new dimension to my life. The flower feels more alive to me than its faded color suggests.

Still I wonder, why am I touching this flower? What am I doing for now, what is for the future? Far too often, I fear that I am an imposter, a woman with good sight wandering the streets with a guide dog, touching her hallway walls and her plants, groping the bathroom floor for a pill I have dropped and can't see; I am panicked lest my cats ingest it. My fears, are they from yesterday, when I saw less; from today, a brighter day; for tomorrow, dim again? Or from a long ago time when as a girl growing up, I learned to pretend to the world that I could manage and not be weak, or helpless, or who I was? I think I learned so deeply, when young, that what is natural to me should be masked that in the present I deny my lack of eyesight and my vulnerability. I question my legitimacy. I tell myself that I am not compromised in any important way, and I imagine I can see.

Simultaneously, I take steps to adapt to my blindness. I learn

new skills for navigating and for appreciating my surroundings. I also concentrate on combating within myself the assumption that my vision is adequate, for acknowledging the reality is necessary for my safety and my self-concept. And often just when I get to the point of recognizing my blindness and feeling comfort with it, I step outside, where I must confront the challenging assumptions of others, who are less familiar with the ambiguities that I have come to know as I navigate an uncertain landscape where blindness blends with sight.

