



## *My Chair of Perseverance*

Outwardly, I joined in the crazy giggles that marked the moments I spent with my girlfriends. We blurted out expectations of college life and teased each other about the guys we'd meet. But inside, my heart ached.

Not even my best friend knew the burden I had tucked inside.

Five years earlier, I'd sat in the chair at the ophthalmologist's office, face propped on the chin rest, with a bright light shining on my dilated pupils. Moments later, the doctor turned to my parents. "She does show signs of the disease."

"There's got to be a cure," my mom anguished.

The doctor shook his head. “Everyone’s retina reacts differently. We know the disease is hereditary, but the exact prognosis is unknown. She may lose her sight, but when, no one really knows.”

**B**ut I knew, all too quickly. Night blindness, the first symptom, had come on like a dark monster. Its effect changed my teen years from fun with friends to moments of fear and insecurity. Exploding with excitement, my friends and I had dashed to our first high school freshman dance. My heart thumped when the star soccer player, gorgeous as can be, asked me to dance. Even when nervousness stiffened my dance moves, the Cinderella syndrome bubbled in me.

But the glass slippers didn’t fit. To my horror, unable to see in the dim lighting, I ended up with my back to him until he eventually walked away. Crushed, I shuffled toward my friends, my face burning with embarrassment.

I carried that agonizing moment through high school. Now, college bound, independence lured me, but tormenting thoughts about my night blindness dampened my expectations.

We unloaded the car, turning our dorm room into crowded quarters of piled boxes and clothes. Once settled in, the afternoon sun filtered through the sparse curtains covering the small window. I looped my long, black hair into a ponytail, slipped into my flip-flops and headed out with my friends. Exploring the campus was our top priority, but for me, another priority dominated my thoughts — finish the walk before dusk. Should night catch me outside, I’d never make it back to the dorm without assistance.

The thought of being a burden and imposing on my girlfriends to lead me around turned my stomach. I’d do anything to avoid that humiliating first impression. Hours later, I was relieved to be back in the dorm before dusk.

Unpacking, we giggled and talked into the evening. Lights went on as the blackness of night peered in from the window. My roommate turned from her make-up mirror toward me. “Hey, aren’t you coming tonight?”

“Nah, kind of tired,” I said. “Think I’ll stay in. Besides, I’m not into that kind of music.”

What a lie. I would’ve loved to be with my friends and potentially meet new ones. But the thought of running into someone, falling down steps, or having to hang onto my friends to walk in the dark areas of campus wiped out any longing to venture out.

“Honey, not being able to see at night isn’t the end of the world. You’ll be fine,” Mom had said.

But I wasn’t fine.

I was miserable, angry and lonely. Mom had noticed my “accidents” before when I ran into people, furniture or even walls when the lighting was too dim — dim for me, but not for the rest of the world.

Only a couple of weeks went by and the dreaded possibility happened. A guy in my Humanities class asked me out. My palms grew sweaty, but I gave him a smile and with gentle words, turned him down. The next week he asked again. Finally, out of nowhere, the truth came out. Maybe I thought telling him the real reason would dissuade him. But, to my shock, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “No big deal. If you have trouble seeing, just hold on to me.”

Hold on to him? I didn’t even know him, but the possibility provided a glimpse of hope.

Everything changed weeks later. As I strode down the hall toward the cafeteria, I spotted a student in a wheelchair. Unable to use his hands, he moved down the hall while pushing his wheelchair backwards with his foot. With awkward movements, he turned the corner and his books slipped out from his bag. I rushed to pick them up, placed them in the bag and patted his thin, crooked hand.

“No problem, they’re all back where they should be.”

The hint of a smile that shone through the sharp movements of his head planted reality in me. He didn’t seem to mind his appearance or the gawky way he maneuvered through campus. I took that image with me to my room that day. In my

insecurity, I'd built walls that kept opportunities out and instead, locked myself in my grief.

The following week, the same guy who'd asked me out earlier, asked again and I accepted.

With that date, a whirlwind of outings began. Each person provided just enough assistance to navigate through places with dim lighting. Though I never ventured out alone at night, I sensed freedom when I accepted other's assistance.

**B**ut what shone brighter yet was letting go of my secret.

During my senior year in college, I met the love of my life. But eventually, my vision diminished, robbing even my daytime sight.

Devastated, I rewind the scene of the student in his wheelchair who pressed on. And even when complete blindness eventually dropped a black curtain into my world, I remembered how he pushed his chair backwards with determination to move forward.

I also used my resolve and drive to face my obstacles and learned new ways to navigate through life. And rather than be impaired by self-pity, I learned to navigate through life by pushing my own wheelchair of perseverance.

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