

Losing My Vision

Category: Stories

written by Sheila Solomon Klass | February 25, 2011

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Sunday, September 26 of this past year began normally enough. I did what I do every day, first thing: I put on my glasses and tested my vision. I'm eighty-three years old, and although I've always been nearsighted and have lived with glaucoma for thirty years, I've developed a worse complaint: AMD, age-related macular degeneration, in my left eye.

My ophthalmologist diagnosed the AMD after I told him that, when I was reading, the print seemed faded and straight lines looked bent. I learned that AMD eats away at the macula, the central part of the retina, gradually destroying your ability to read, to watch television, even to recognize familiar faces. Today my left eye sees shapes and colors but no details; it cannot read print.

At that visit, I also learned that AMD comes in two varieties: wet and dry. Dry AMD destroys the tiny blood vessels beneath the macula, blurring the vision; wet AMD forms new abnormal blood vessels, which leak fluid and damage the vision more severely.

I had the dry kind, considered better because it doesn't spread from one eye to the other. But, warned my ophthalmologist, it could treacherously turn wet at any moment.

So in the five years since my AMD diagnosis, I've followed my doctor's prescribed morning regimen. I go to my refrigerator, to which I've taped an Amsler Chart—a postcard with a neat arrangement of lines and boxes—and read it. If the lines look symmetrical and unbroken, then I know the AMD hasn't spread.

I'm an English teacher and novelist; books and the printed word are my sustenance. My attitude has been that, yes, my eyes are bad; yes, I am legally blind; but I can still read, and mark papers. If only my eyesight remains stable—if only I can continue to see—I can accept my diagnosis...

On that Sunday morning in September, the lines on the chart looked perfect. It was a typical autumn day, light-jacket weather, overcast but not threatening. As I walked to the subway, on my way downtown to join my daughter for lunch, I suffered a fearful epiphany.

I felt the AMD move into my good eye.

Suddenly I could see the air all about me—and it was noxious, a miasma of moving blurs and pollutants. A red light stopped, and the cars' glowing headlights glared at me in jagged, radiant clusters.

Terrified of falling, I slowed down and clutched the banister as I hesitantly

descended the steps into the subway.

I rode the train with my eyes shut, counting stations so I'd know when to get off. After a while, though, I mustered up the courage to take a peek.

When I emerged at the end of the forty-minute ride, I was no longer seeing the air; the day just looked dim.

I tried to talk myself out of my anxious state. Probably I had imagined it. After all, nobody sees air! And a disease can't just suddenly leap into your eye.

As relieved as I felt, I was still scared enough to mention the episode to my daughter, who is a physician. "Call your ophthalmologist," she said.

I was reluctant. I was brought up not to bother the doctor. It was Sunday, and my doctor didn't live in the city.

"I'm pretty sure this will pass," I said.

"Call him!" my daughter insisted. "That's why he has an answering service. He's taken care of you for years; he would want to know."

He returned my call and said he'd come into the city if I wanted him to. But I didn't want him to. My eyes felt so much better; surely the momentary blurring had been a combination of my lurid imagination and my terror of blindness?

Coincidentally, though, I was scheduled for a routine visit the next morning with the specialist who'd been following my AMD. My ophthalmologist said that they could consult together afterwards.

The next morning, my description of the incident, plus an eye exam, brought immediate answers. Yes, the AMD had turned from dry to wet. And yes, it had moved into my good eye.

"But the Amsler Chart showed nothing wrong," I protested.

"Sometimes there are different symptoms," the specialist said apologetically. "The treatment for this condition is an Avastin injection into the eye to help prevent the blood-vessel growth and leakage. I'd like to give you the shot now. Would you be willing?"

The shot of Avastin into the muscles around my eye wasn't painful; I was anesthetized by fear. I left the office with a three-day supply of antibiotic drops.

Actually, those three days were supposed to be devoted to my big trip. A novel I'd written for young adults had won a literary award from the North Dakota Library Association, and I was supposed to go off to collect it and address the librarians' convention. This would be my first trip alone in years; I'd been looking forward to it with excitement and trepidation.

I started for home, determined to stay calm and grown-up. I stopped downstairs to pick up the mail, went up to my apartment and put away my purse, my coat and the antibiotic.

And then I lost my glasses.

I'd been wearing them, but suddenly they were gone. I ransacked my apartment and the mailroom, the only two possible locations. The glasses weren't in either.

My son came over to help me look for them.

"I bet if Sigmund Freud were here he could explain all this," I said. "How could I have done such a thing?"

My son peered into my grocery shelves and checked the freezer. Even though he can see perfectly well, he couldn't find my glasses either.

"Can I really go to North Dakota?" I had a single day left.

"Yes," my son said.

We devised a plan to get some new glasses—quickly.

I flew to North Dakota, read my speech, got my award and spoke to several high school classes, my new pair of glasses secured by an equally new eyeglass necklace.

I'm back home now, learning to live with wet AMD as I have with other things. Periodic shots of Avastin are just one more part of my complicated life. I wear my eyeglass necklace faithfully: It's my lifeline in the face of potential tragedy. Irreparable loss threatens, but I try not to feel intimidated.

On bright days I tell myself how lucky I am to have good doctors and remarkable medicines. When I'm weary or have just tripped or dropped something breakable, fear fills my heart. I'm scared of total darkness. Still, I often laugh at my gaffes. At a recent dinner party I horrified my hostess by scattering a hefty serving spoon of what I took to be grated parmesan onto my pasta. It was kosher salt.

And I never did find that lost pair of eyeglasses.

About the author:

Sheila Solomon Klass has been teaching English for forty-five years at Manhattan Community College/CUNY. She is the author of nineteen books, including [*Every Mother is a Daughter: The Neverending Quest for Success, Inner Peace, and a Really Clean Kitchen*](#) (Ballantine 2006), a memoir written with her daughter, Dr. Perri Klass; and, most recently, [*Soldier's Secret: The Story of Deborah Sampson*](#) (Holt 2009), a novel for young adults. Sheila also has a blog, blogginggrandma.wordpress.com.

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