

HITTING A HOME RUN BLIND AND THRIVING



AMY BOVAIRD

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By Amy L. Bovaird

The 'ace pitcher' had been around for years trying to strike me out. But with the luck o' the Irish I had been able to avoid that from happening. I continued living out my dream of teaching overseas and traveling to exotic destinations during breaks. But in 2006, an unexpected family issue came up and I flew back to Pennsylvania from the Middle East and settled into my family's house.

Sliding into home place turned out to be a game changer. If my nemesis had its way, I would never make another home run. All the confidence and the success I had experienced over the past twenty years dwindled after I returned. In fact, I found myself in an endless pattern of fancy maneuvers, trying to steal the next base, but getting sent back to first every time. The lack of progress made me feel like quitting.

I had a decision to make—a change in strategy that would impact the rest of every game I played.

To tell you the story from the start, I have to go back to a noteworthy turning point that occurred in 1988.

With a slight push, the glass door opened. Delicate bells sounded to let the eye doctor know a patient had arrived. To one side of the entrance a scuffed plastic mat lay with a pair of men's black rubbers sitting neatly on top. I stomped the snow free from my chukka boots and unlaced the long cords. After pulling them off, I lined up my footwear next to the first pair.

"Come in. Close the door." The voice belonged to a short, well-groomed bearded man wearing an off-white lab coat. I noticed there was no receptionist in sight.

I slid the door shut. "Brrrr. Too cold."

He shrugged. "It's January. Have to expect it."

"Not me. I just came back from Costa Rica. The land of the sun, fast showers, and all-out umbrella warfare on busses."

The middle-aged doctor chuckled as he offered his hand. "Doctor Segu. Originally from the land of mystery and diversity."

"So you're from ... India?" I peeled off my red gloves and shook his hand. One day I would visit that exotic country and not just read about it.

"That's correct."

I eyed him curiously. Not many foreigners settled in my hometown, unless that had changed since I was away. I wanted to ask where he lived in India, what it was like and how he came to settle in an area with weather as cold as ours. I was curious to probe deeper. What had made him choose to set up his practice where he had only curbside parking on the main street and most businesses focused on retail. And, had the other shop owners welcomed him?

Amy, hold your questions at bay, I told myself. This wasn't a social call, or a chance meeting on the street. He was my eye doctor.

I unzipped my ski jacket, a leftover from my freshman year of college nearly a decade earlier, and unwound the bright green knitted scarf I had found in the hall closet. I will admit, it clashed horribly but it did the job.

The doctor pointed to a coat rack. I hung up my jacket and scarf, noting the dark wood and old-fashioned circular design, typical of small-town life.

I could see his entire office at a glance. It was long and narrow with two plain wooden chairs by the door that constituted a “waiting room,” and at the far end, a section for examining patients.

Probably only one, or at most, two, people ever waited while the doctor tested a patient. But on this wintry day, the office held only Doctor Segu and me.

He handed me a clipboard with papers to fill out. His glossy black hair had an attractive wave. Small, deep-set dark eyes focused on me. He had a kind smile, showing off well-kept teeth.

I took a seat and began to fill out the forms. Halfway through, I called out, “No insurance. I’m between teaching jobs.”

He nodded and indicated I was to continue.

Doctor Segu stood in the examining area, his back turned. While I waited for him to notice I had finished, I observed the room more closely. Pale green walls with what I supposed were the doctor’s credentials inscribed on plaques hung along the right side. Just a few feet away from me sat a water cooler. I filled a white, cone-shaped cup and took a sip.

The doctor approached and reached for the clip board. “What brings you to my office on this cold day?”

“This is going to sound crazy. But I recently traveled to the interior jungle in Ecuador.” I paused to gather my thoughts. “I was having so much difficulty seeing even during daylight hours. But of course, the rainforest always looks dark. I swear I

felt night blind.” Night blind? It sounded melodramatic to my own ears but how else could I explain it? “I’m going to teach in Indonesia soon, so I have to have a new prescription for my glasses before I leave.”

Doctor Segu blinked, clearly not expecting my answer. He studied me intently from the other chair, both hands locked around his knee. He said nothing. My face burned. Did he think I was showing off? In the short time I sat in his office, I had hurtled names of the foreign countries in quick succession as if I were a major league pitcher tossing fast balls. I could almost hear them whizzing by.

“What do you mean by night blind?”

“Oh, kind of bumbling, not seeing things the guide pointed out. You know, the usual.” I said casually, as if this didn’t scare me at all.

Doctor Segu frowned. “Amy, was the jungle the first time you noticed this night blindness?”

“Well, if you don’t count the fender benders, getting lost driving to basketball games at night, and tripping unexpectedly, I guess...”

Whoa. That admission came out of nowhere. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that I might have had problems seeing for a while.

The doctor’s concerned face unsettled me. I needed to get this conversation back on track. I searched for a light comeback but nothing came to mind.

He stood up. “Let’s have a look at the chart, shall we? Come on back.”

I followed him to a dark green examination chair covered in a layer of thick, clear plastic.

He turned off the lights, and the eye chart lit up. "Cover your right eye. Can you read it?"

I read the first two or three lines straight through and part of the fourth. "That's an E. no, an F, I guess it's an E. I'll stay with E. Next one? R, or perhaps a P." I studied the chart. "I'm sure the next one is a C" I squinted. "Ah, not sure, hmm, it could be an O. Is it?" I wanted validation. I also wished I could run up to the screen and memorize the letters without him seeing.

Ah, ah, ah, no cheating.

"Let's try the left," he prodded gently.

I covered the opposite eye with the long, spoon-like instrument. Determined, I posed, ready to hit this target squarely. But the small voice within me said as I attempted to decipher the letters, "Foul Ball. Foul. Another Foul."

"Are we done?" I asked the doc. "I think I've seen enough." As if I were in charge, I removed the cupped instrument from my eye. I didn't want to make an OUT and that was exactly where I was headed.

"Amy, we will need to dilate your eyes. Sorry, the drops will burn a little."

I started to get out of the chair, but he motioned me to stay seated. "We can do it right here."

I tipped my head back and he deftly added the drops. Eyes stinging, I blinked. Then he handed me something soft—a tissue.

I dabbed at my eyes and waited for the solution to take effect.

In the interim, I scanned the room, and noticed a painting I had not seen earlier. It depicted several coconut trees by a water's edge. Probably something from India. I closed my eyes to recall another set of tropical trees.

On the plane coming home, the sun had yet to rise. The passenger window remained shuttered. I knew what lay beyond the tarmac—palm trees lining the main streets, swaying gracefully in the breeze. In my mind, I imagined them to be *Tica bailadores*, swishing skirts of palm from one side to another. The plane gained altitude, and I saw the beautiful dancers in a line waving an extended goodbye from Costa Rica.

The eye doctor came alongside my chair. "May I have a look now?"

My eyes fluttered open and the pleasant memory of the palm fronds vanished. "Uh, yes. Certainly."

He held a small but bright flashlight in his hand. When he leaned in to shine it in my eyes, I noticed a faint aroma of garlic. He aimed the slender light at my pupils in various angles without speaking. Finally, he finished.

"So how 'bout ... the prescription?"

Doctor Segu's momentary silence and serious expression revealed he was not inclined to change my script and send me on my merry way to Indonesia.

I gulped.

"I think there is a correlation between you having difficulty seeing in the dark and the possibility of a retinal degeneration."

He suggested I see a specialist.

The following week, my mother drove me to meet with the retinal specialist. She glanced over at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just thinking about how I landed the job in Indonesia.” The half-truth slid off my tongue. My real thoughts—wrapping my mind around seeing a specialist was a lot like trying to find traction on the January ice—and better left unspoken.

A frown came over Mom’s face. I knew she didn’t want me to go so far away. “Don’t you think you should ‘hold your horses’ and find out what the specialist has to say?”

“My horses are in mid-gallop.” I looked at her sideways but she wasn’t smiling. “Things always work out the way they’re supposed to,” I reminded her. “And, as you always say, I ‘have the luck o’ the Irish.’” Unfortunately, even tossing this quote back at her—which usually brought a smile to her face—failed to work.

She looked skeptical. “Where is Indonesia?”

“Near Bali,” I said vaguely, vowing to look it up on a world map before daring to bring it up again. Except for that detail, I was clueless, too.

We rode the rest of the way in silence.

The appointment at the specialist’s office turned into two days. This doctor poked and prodded my eyes, and made me look into strange-shaped machines.

Midway through the second day, the diagnosis came. The eye professional launched into an explanation. He started with “eye condition.” Then he jumped to the words “Retinitis Pigmentosa” and “autosomal.”

“What does pigmentosis mean?”

“That refers to the pigment that forms on your retina and blocks your sight.”

I took a deep breath. “What causes it?”

He leaned forward. “That’s where the hereditary part comes in.” He proceeded to give me a crash course in genetics.

“It’s a rare condition, one in a hundred thousand.” He thought my parents must be carriers because they didn’t have any of the symptoms I did. That made it even rarer. Apparently, whether the inherited gene resulted from a recessive or dominant gene determined the likelihood for passing it on to their offspring. The chances for my siblings and me to inherit the gene was one in four.

I hit the jackpot. Luck o’ the Irish indeed.

“Retinitis Pigmentosa, more commonly called RP, begins with night blindness and narrows to what is called ‘tunnel vision,’ because it is as if you are looking through a tunnel. You gradually lose your peripheral or side vision.” He paused to let those words sink in. His tone softened. “Eventually, you will lose the sight in the center of your eye as well.”

I couldn’t breathe for a moment. “I ... I don’t understand. No one in my family even wears g-glasses. Are you sure you have the right chart?” I meant it as a joke, however weak, but he took me seriously.

“I wish I didn’t have to tell you about losing your sight. I know it’s hard to take it all in. The worst thing about this condition is that it’s progressive and leads to blindness. But we don’t know when. For some individuals, sight deteriorates rapidly. For others, it’s a slow process. But what we do know is that it will happen.”

“Doctor, I don’t look or feel blind. I can still see you.”

He nodded as if in complete agreement. “It’s confusing, for sure—not only for the one experiencing it but also for the general public and to us, as professionals. But we are beginning to learn more about it. Maybe someday there will be a cure.”

I could not grasp the enormity of “incurable.”

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The next few weeks passed slowly. It was as if I had been shot with a stun gun. My fast-paced life came to a crawl and I could barely get out of bed. Indonesia completely went off the map, and the blustering days in Northwest Pennsylvania even lost their ability to freeze me. Inside, another coldness numbed my soul.

But as happens with a stun gun, the shock wears off. Much to my mother’s dismay, I decided to pursue my contract overseas. I would deal with my vision loss in Indonesia. I had no idea if I would just wake up one day without sight or how it would happen. But certainly, I could not stay home and “wait to go blind.”

At twenty-eight, I felt young and capable. Not only did I want to see the world, I now needed to. I had to cram a lot of seeing into a little bit of time.

Mom and I talked it over endlessly. She tried to convince me to stay home. I tried to persuade her to trust I would be okay. The rest of the family stayed out of it.

Neither her fears nor her tears swayed my decision, nor did her arguments of safety or any of the logical reasons most parents use to stop their children traveling halfway around the world.

As I confirmed the airline ticket and packed my bags, an awful fear struck home. If I lost my vision in Indonesia, this might be the last time I would see my family.

When no one was looking, I memorized their features. I watched my father's antics, which always showed up on his face. I noticed my mother's fleeting smile, and the way she jabbed her finger at me when she wanted to make a point. I stared at my sister when she was excited or about to tell a funny story. I wondered if my brother's shock of red hair, currently in a Mohawk cut and whether I would ever see any other unusual style he chose?

My young nieces' faces wrenched my heart. They looked so innocent and trusting. How could I not see their sweet faces again?

I felt brave getting on the airplane, setting out for a foreign land. Yet I wondered if anything would be visible when I stepped foot in my home country a year later.

Moments of fear played themselves out in various scenarios as I worked and traveled in Indonesia during weekends and teaching breaks. The not knowing when "it would happen" and the vagueness of what to expect impacted me.

I was glad I never told anyone about it in my host country even though I had my adventures. In my neighborhood, I nearly toppled over a wet cliff. My *pembantu* appeared at my side. The twenty-five-year-old houseboy, short in stature, called out, "Miss Amy, *hati-hati*." Take care.

The near disaster shocked us both. It was as if I had a flyball whizzing directly at me. Little Eddy stepped in to catch it without even a mitt.

I ended up covered in mud but injury free. That incident led to the famous *bak-mandi* joke that rippled around the expat community—Indonesian bath time for Miss Amy.

Eddy never learned about my vision issues. But after that fiasco, he took on another role, as surreptitious body guard. Who knows? Perhaps he was only guarding his job by ensuring I stayed alive.

As I continued with new teaching positions overseas, my fears subsided and denial conveniently set in.

Yet in the back of my mind, I knew I was always up to bat. Retinitis Pigmentosa became a formidable pitcher. I studied its stance to anticipate the delivery of the pitch. Early on, I could adapt myself and run the bases. But later, it caught me off guard. I found the best way to cope during those innings was to develop a thick skin and a sense of humor—and to keep playing the game.

By “playing the game,” I was determined to play it my way. I swam in the Dead Sea, snorkeled in the Red Sea, mud-packed in the Black Sea—all successfully.

But when it came to testing the turquoise water of the Aegean Sea off the Greek isle of Santorini, I became disoriented and swam away from our day ship. While treading water, I tried to find my bearings. A strong swimmer from the cruise noticed how far out I had drifted and rescued me. Could I have drowned in that sea and among my fears? I was too tired to swim back on my own.

Out of danger, I could finally laugh when my Egyptian, then-husband teased me. “I thought you planned to swim to the next island. I was sure I married an Olympian swimmer.”

No doubt we both knew it was that RP pitcher catching me off guard again. But we never acknowledged it out loud. I wasn't going to let it deter me.

Not many people knew about my sight issues. I wanted to stay independent so if that meant keeping it quiet, that was my game plan. A couple of close friends did know, and sometimes their solicitous offers of help had the opposite effect.

Once while traveling in Morocco, a friend offered to take my hand while crossing the street during rush hour. My companions on that trip had children, and I suddenly felt I had been reduced to their young ages. Back then my pride took precedence over safety and precaution. I shrugged her hand away and shot off on my own.

Conversely, in Kiev, long after the end of my marriage, my sight issues gave me the green light to hold on tightly to my Ukrainian host. I recall walking home from an awe-inspiring ballet. Temperatures were below freezing and I leaned into him for warmth. Puffs of air appeared when we spoke. I felt safe with his arm around me. Just when I thought I could fall in love again, he whispered in my ear, "Do you want to marry me?" I held my breath in excitement and it came out in an even bigger puff of steam.

Then, with a sweet nuzzle, he added, "I can't wait to be a lawyer in the US." I thought surely I had heard him incorrectly. Suddenly the private tours to churches off-limit for tourists, the loan of his mother's fur coat, the toasts of champagne over expensive dinners, the exquisite ballet performance and the bottles of unwanted vodka all made sense. He was making an allegiance, not a marriage. I sighed. He stopped walking and laid his head on my shoulder, then whispered again, "What do you think, Amy?"

I couldn't hear him and his breath tickled. My intention was to rub my overly-sensitive ear, but his lips were so close, my fingers ended up inside his mouth. In trying to remove them, I accidentally jabbed him and he started to choke. I feared he might bite! So, *tout-suite*, I tried to move away. But my hand was stuck, and he gagged. It was just my luck o' the Irish he had a small mouth. When the awkward moment passed and my scraped hand lay limp by my side, I said as politely as possible, "Can you repeat your question?"

His shocked expression made me turn away. In that fleeting moment, I transferred the diamond earrings he had recently gifted into the pocket of the borrowed fur I was wearing—which I detested anyway as an animal activist—and returned them back to him.

As the years went on, I kept adapting. My increasingly unreliable eyesight thrust me into precarious situations. While teaching in the Middle East, I had a steel bar from my backyard seemingly lunge at my head. Luckily, no stitches were required but the oversized bump made me feel lopsided for a while. Other mishaps followed. Steps began to appear—or disappear—at random.

The worst case occurred at a college where I taught women. During a break in end-of-semester English exams, I had to escort a student to the restroom as per testing protocol. Halfway there, I ran smack-bang into a cement column. Stunned, I bounced off the cement and fell to the floor, yelping in pain, blood oozing impressively down my forehead. Oh, the gasps!

Unfortunately, the head injury was not something I could just dust myself off from and continue on with my duties. Helen stepped into my lead invigilating role. "Go to the hospital," she said, with a little push.

The friend, whose hand I refused in Morocco, helped me gather my belongings from the testing hall. I leaned on her, grateful for her support that day.

As I left the room, and on reaching the door, I called back, “I have eyes in the back of my head, so beware of cheating, ladies!” It was a crazy thing to say. Perhaps I wanted to seem in control despite my clumsiness.

I heard one girl say to a small cluster of classmates as I passed through the door, “What happened to the ones in front of her head?”

It made me smile, and then laugh. What an apt question. If only I knew.

After receiving sutures on my head wound at the local hospital, my friend made me promise to s-l-o-w down and take more precautions.

Life didn’t always create such instability for me. In some ways, my sight issues gave me a break. Instead of driving in Taiwan, I cheerfully took on cleaning the toilets as my contribution to our mission and left my teammates to the traffic headaches.

But my overseas adventures came to a close when in early March, 2006, my mother phoned me in the Middle East to inform me of Dad’s stage-4 lung cancer. I flew home to see for myself how his situation stood. Disbelief warred with fear as my family’s stable world crumbled. Mom, always robust and heatedly in charge, suddenly seemed fragile. I decided then to move home.

Similar to the early days of learning about my vision loss, I memorized the features of my family members. Eighteen years had gone by since fearing I would

never see them again after leaving for Indonesia and I could still see their faces, even though they looked blurrier. What a gift of time I had received!

I sat by my father's bedside, alert to any change in expression. His face looked weathered and somehow tanned although it was only April. His constant presence outdoors must have been etched deeply on his skin. Most of the time, his face remained still, resigned, or he was asleep. Every once in a great while, an eyebrow would lift and I could see his humor briefly emerge from something witty I had shared. That was it. He rarely spoke.

On May 18, he passed away. As I settled back home, we all faced our loss together.

After more than two decades of teaching English as a Second Language, I decided to try my hand at travel writing. I took courses and sharpened my rhetoric. Kevin Costner, the main character of the popular baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, followed a voice, "if you build it (a baseball field), they will come." Like Costner, I, too, pursued a little voice. Mine came from inside. "If I write it, sales will come." The problem was I couldn't write it. Articles didn't bring enough money and writing a memoir seemed out of my realm of expertise.

To make a living, I had to go back to teaching. In the two years away from the classroom, my sight and hearing had both deteriorated. My field of dreams had switched into a mountain of nightmares. The Grand RP Pitcher returned with a relentless vengeance. Every day I swore it would be different, but it wasn't. My luck had soured.

In the classroom, I fought to hide my vision loss and hearing challenges from the students. But the harder I struggled to remain in control, the more slip-ups I

made. It wasn't until I turned to the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services that my luck began to change along with my attitude.

I call this my crossroads year, "the year my faith journey met my physical journey." The experience is chronicled in *Mobility Matters: Stepping Out in Faith*. Orientation and Mobility took me out of my comfort zone, into another culture, and, ultimately on a life-changing adventure at home.

Little by little, I stopped seeing my RP Pitcher as a rival enemy on the opposite team wanting to strike me out. I started to view it as an entity to test my reflexes and measure my progress. I would even go as far as to say that we have a mutual respect for each other. Though we have never become outright friends, when I hear "Play ball!" I don't wince. Instead, I head for the baseball diamond with my protective gear—my attitude-uniform, complete with invisible shin guards and I never approach the field without wearing my cap of humor.

In time, I began to examine both the past and present. I recalled the many near-misses I had. Life lessons of all kinds jumped out at me. Even the tough ones, in retrospect, had value. Most were humorous and uplifting. I decided to share them in my second memoir, *Cane Confessions: The Lighter Side to Mobility*.

The often-zany stories continue in my upcoming memoir, *Second Sight: More Life Lessons in Mobility*. At this stage, I have nearly reached the end of the tunnel in my physical vision. Doctors have not been able to determine the extent of my vision loss as they could not get a reading due to my extreme light sensitivity, otherwise known as photophobia.

My current retinal specialist says I have lost my peripheral vision. Sometimes I feel I've been demoted to the minor leagues. But what I can honestly say now is that

it doesn't matter. It's more important to keep tossing the ball out and finding a way to stay in the real game of life.

I share my mobility life lessons to educate, encourage, and entertain. While Retinitis Pigmentosa may impact people in somewhat different ways, there are universals we can all relate to—and that is helpful.

Everyone needs hope, whatever it is we battle individually. I share my own hope as I continue to play my heart out. When I educate others, they, too, are free to join the team. It doesn't matter how long they are up to bat, or even if they hit the ball. The only rule is to stay active and help catch the fly balls. We can all be winners. The stadium will swell with the cheers of our fans. When someone reaches the point of renewed vision with or without sight loss, it can feel as exhilarating as hitting a home run.