

## BLIND FAITH

French Creek Road twists and turns among the live oak and chaparral that define the Sierra Nevada foothills at about the 1,500-foot elevation mark. Local roads bear the names given them by the folks that live there. Most of the residents of Shingle Springs want no part of what they left behind when they went into the woods. I was headed to Dolores Lane, where I followed an arrow nailed to a tree until I reached a small house. As I walked to the front door, I tried to shake off my insecurity.

The local newspaper had run a story looking for people to serve as “friendly visitors” to isolated seniors living in the foothills. The county Senior Services Department provided guidelines for their program (number one was *don't talk about your own troubles*), and I intended to follow them.

So on a March day in 1996, eleven years married to someone who no longer found me interesting, I hoped to provide a service that would make me feel useful. I knocked on the door, and a tiny brown woman answered, wearing a bright smile and a pair of long, dramatic earrings. Her eyes were hidden by dark glasses, but I had already been told that she was blind.

“You’re my volunteer,” Dolores said with excitement. “Please come in. I have a kettle on for tea.” Her fluttering hands waved me in the door.

I walked into a small room overstuffed with furniture and spider webs, but otherwise tidy. A stove in one corner warmed me, giving off the scent of wood smoke. Glancing around, I noticed framed photos on every surface. She was about the same age as my mother (born in 1917), and as we talked, I soon felt comfortable with her despite our different backgrounds. I avoided the obvious question, but she was not at all reluctant to talk about her blindness.

“My family left the Philippines in 1918 on a boat bound for Hawaii, because my father had heard there was work in the sugar cane fields,” she told me. “On the way, the Spanish flu spread among the passengers. It was terrible. Many people, both adults and children, died and were buried at sea.”

One-year-old Dolores became ill, but her own parents were suffering and unable to take care of her. The fever blinded her permanently. As she told me her story, the kettle began to

whistle on the stove. She moved to the kitchen without any hesitation or faltering, and in a moment the fragrance of chai filled the air. I rose to help her carry the mugs, but she brushed past me and carefully set them down on the coffee table.

“You must be wondering what I’m doing, living out here in the woods all by myself.” She took a sip of tea. “My husband always wanted to live in the country. So when he retired from the shipyards in Vallejo, we bought this lot, and he put up the house himself. That was twenty-five years ago. When he passed eight years ago, my daughters wanted me to come live with them, but I like to be independent.”

“Tell me about your family,” I said. I was trying to follow the suggestions given to me in my two-hour Friendly Visitors orientation meeting – ask them about themselves, and so on – but already I was drawn to know more about this woman’s life.

“I have six wonderful daughters,” she said, smiling. “My eldest lives in Sacramento, and she comes out once a week to take me grocery shopping. The rest live too far away, but we all get together sometimes.”

Dolores was the first blind student to graduate from the University of Hawaii. Even with a degree in English, though, she couldn’t get a teaching job. She found part-time work in the public library, but she wanted more. She applied for graduate school and was accepted at Columbia University in New York City, with a full scholarship.

I wanted to know how she moved around the city, how she managed to read the class lessons and write out the assignments. I tried to picture a poor, blind, rural Asian woman surviving alone in New York City in the 1930’s. She told me that she learned the subway system pretty quickly and that she had a “reader” paid by her scholarship to assist her with lessons. She never once doubted her ability to succeed.

Afterwards, she went back to Hawaii where she met and married her husband. A child soon followed, and then another. She was in the hospital in Honolulu, having just given birth to her second child, when Pearl Harbor was bombed.

“I was in a big maternity ward with lots of other new mothers,” she told me. “We heard the planes flying overhead, but we didn’t know what was happening. The nurses wouldn’t tell

us. We could sense they were upset, but they just ran around closing all the window shades so no one could see outside.” I said she must have been frightened, but she laughed and told me that God had always taken care of her, so why should she worry?

I asked what had brought her family to Northern California. She said that when their first two girls reached school age, they discussed moving to the mainland. Hawaii wasn't a state yet, and they knew the schools were better here. They decided to relocate to Vallejo, where her husband could work in the shipyards.

At the end of the visit, I promised to come again the next week. I realized on the drive home that for the last two hours I had not thought once about my own problems. As I bumped my way down the gravel road, peace washed over me. I wanted to sit again over a cup of tea and hear more about this woman's surprising life.

The next Tuesday began with a cloud hanging over me once I let the children off at school. I was tempted to just go home and sink back into depression, but I had promised Dolores that I would come for another visit. As I headed uphill, I reminded myself that I only had to stay for a couple of hours.

Dolores met me at the door with her coat on, ready to set out on errands. She wanted me to take her to the post office to pick up her mail. When we got there, she handed me the key to her box. I pulled out the mail, and she asked me to go through it: an envelope with a handwritten address, a utility bill and two pieces of junk mail. The envelope held a sweet card from her daughter in Arizona, full of family news and expressions of love. Next I read the amount due on the utility bill. She reached into her purse, pulled out a checkbook and asked me to pay it for her. I was surprised by her trust in me.

Afterwards, Dolores took me on a tour of her small house. She pointed out pictures lining a hallway and talked about her many grandchildren. A framed newspaper photo from the Vallejo Times-Herald headlined “Teacher of the Year” showed Dolores standing with a group of high school students, and I asked about it.

She told me that when the youngest of her six daughters started kindergarten, she decided it was time to try again for a teaching job. As she knew the faculty and administration of the

high school very well by that time, she managed to secure an open position as an English teacher.

“I taught there for twelve years, until my husband had to retire because of a heart condition,” she said. “After I retired, I learned that I had been on probation the entire time. If I had made even one small mistake, I would have been dismissed, simply because I am blind.”

On another Tuesday, she wanted to show me the artist studio out back where her husband loved to paint. Inside the small structure, several canvases lined the walls, and she led me from one to the next just as though she could see them. She liked to run her fingers over the surface of the paintings and feel the brushstrokes. Heading back to the house, she sighed.

“I was very independent in Vallejo,” she said. “We had sidewalks everywhere, and traffic lights. I could walk my daughters to school, do my own shopping, visit with neighbors. Now that I’m alone, I don’t dare go outside any more for fear of walking into a tree or falling down a ditch. That’s why I signed up for a visitor.”

I looked at this strong woman and thought of how she had sacrificed her independence for the man she loved. Things weren’t going well with my own marriage, and I had no idea what to do about it. I had learned, though, that no matter how rotten I felt on Tuesday morning, my mood would have lifted by the time I drove home from my visit with Dolores. For five years, I rarely missed a Tuesday.

She loved to travel overseas, first with her husband and later with a niece. She showed me the photo albums that she herself could not see, a separate album for each adventure. One photo featured a smiling Dolores sitting astride a camel. I asked her what she liked best about Egypt, expecting her to tell me about smells, sounds, or tastes. Her memories included all of those, but Dolores was happiest when she was meeting new people with different customs.

I looked around the little house, wondering how she could afford to take a trip abroad every two years. She simply didn’t spend money on anything else. She bought remnants of yarn at a thrift shop (she had “learned her colors” as a child at a school for the blind) with which she knitted layettes for her great-grandchildren. She started her Christmas shopping every year in July at the Dollar Store, so that by October she had a closet holding gifts wrapped for every

member of her family. She had no car, she didn't want gadgets, and her home - which she heated with wood pellets - was debt-free.

We sometimes played Scrabble with a special set. It differed only in that it had braille dots in addition to letters on the tiles, as well as small raised edges around the board squares to keep the tiles from sliding around. She beat me handily. Somehow, the entire board was displayed in her mind. She could "see" it without even running her hands across it.

She admitted that after a few years, her life began to seem very restricted out in the country. She couldn't walk around freely, and she felt trapped by "cabin fever." So at the age of 72, after talking it over with her husband, she enlisted in the Peace Corps for a one-year stint. She took a crash course in Spanish and was placed in the Ecuadorian Andes, teaching newly blind people how to light their gas stoves.

I was astonished. "Weren't you afraid you'd blow everyone up?"

She had a good laugh at that. "I told you, God takes care of me. I wasn't a bit worried about it. My husband and I did have a big phone bill that year, though." Clearly, her husband had sacrificed for her as well. I tried to imagine what that kind of partnership would be like.

I watched as Dolores grew frailer over those five years, until finally she made plans to live with her daughter in Arizona. On my last visit, she thanked me for all of the time I'd spent with her. I gently squeezed her hand, unable to express what our friendship had given me. I knew, though, that partly because this indomitable woman found value in me, I now had the self-confidence to change my own life.