

GUEST ESSAY

I Am Going Blind, and I Now Find It Strangely Exhilarating

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By Edward Hirsch

Mr. Hirsch is a poet, critic and the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.



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I have been gradually going blind for the past 20 years. I didn't pay attention — I thought I needed better glasses — until one night I popped out to go to the bathroom in a crowded movie theater. When I returned, the people and the seats had disappeared. I couldn't see anything except the screen. I stood in the back of the theater until my partner, Laurie, came to find me. This was disconcerting, but I went about my business in my usual state of cheerful denial.

My eyesight deteriorated precipitously during the pandemic, but I didn't notice because I was busy running a foundation from a small bedroom in Laurie's house in Decatur, Ga.

I was in for a shock when I returned to New York City. I had trouble seeing things in my apartment. I had difficulty navigating stairs. People in my office found it hazardous to turn a corner when I was on the move. In the streets, as crowds thickened, I became a liability. I tripped over a man who was sprawled on the sidewalk. I stumbled into a stop sign. A tree branch clocked me.

My disaster was taking place in slow motion — I still had time to observe it. Two things triggered a change. First, I knocked over a little kid who ran in front of me in a restaurant. He screamed bloody murder, then brushed himself off. Then I accidentally bumped into a woman on a dark street corner. She was with a group of friends and started shouting obscenities at me. When I told people that I couldn't see them, they didn't believe me. You don't look blind, they said.

My new eye doctor diagnosed me with a type of retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary eye disease — my mother had it, and so does my younger sister. In the back of my mind, I knew that I had it too, but avoided the unhappy truth since there is no cure. It strikes a disproportionate number of Ashkenazi Jews and therefore seems like one more gift from God. I can barely make out at 20 feet what most people can see at 200. Plus, my peripheral vision is shot. Darkness is utterly dark. My doctor mentioned that with my vision at less than 20/200, I was legally blind and advised me to go get