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The Blind Vet

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Preview

When Nick returned home from the war in Afghanistan blinded by a bomb, he knew his life would never be the same. In so many ways, Nick would have to start all over again, and he wasn't certain he could do it. When Nick's friends slowly stopped coming by to see him, Nick fell into a sadness that threatened to destroy all his hopes. He wanted to give up. But one very special person refused to give up on Nick.

Words to Watch

rivulet (4): small stream

IED (6): improvised explosive device, a homemade roadside bomb that caused significant casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan

apprehension (8): fear

sufficiently (23): enough

1 When Nick boarded the bus, everyone looked at him. A few people shook their heads in pity. It didn't seem right that such a young man should have so much trouble climbing the three short steps up to the bus aisle.

2 "Why does that man have that white stick?" a small girl asked her mother loudly.

3 "Shh!" the mother said quickly. "It's not polite to talk about him, honey. He's blind."

4 But Nick had heard the little girl. In fact, he could feel everyone's eyes on him even though he couldn't see them. Using his cane, Nick carefully measured

the height of each step. Gripping the handrail with white knuckles, he slowly made his way to the aisle. Then he used his hands to feel his way. Gratefully, Nick eased into the first set of seats reserved for the disabled. A thin rivulet° of sweat trickled down Nick's forehead, and his hands shook.

Okay. Relax. Nick tried to calm 5 himself down. You'll be all right. You'll make it.

Nick, barely 22, had been blind 6 for just over a year. During a tour of duty in Afghanistan, the vehicle Nick had been riding in had run over an IED°. Nick remembered a bright flash, a

terrible explosion, and the screams of his comrades. Then, the bright color of his own blood in his eyes was the last thing Nick ever saw. Fragments of metal and glass had scarred his face and destroyed his eyes.

7 When he came home from the war, Nick was frightened. What would his friends think of him? Two of Nick's favorite pastimes had been cycling and playing basketball, and that's how he had met a lot of his friends. Now he wouldn't be able to do either. Would his friends even want to be around him anymore?

8 But Nick's biggest apprehension^o was that his girlfriend, Kristen, would leave him. The two of them had been together since high school, and Nick had secretly planned on proposing to Kristen when he returned from Afghanistan. But he never dreamed that he'd be returning like this. Now Kristen would have to take care of him—if she even wanted to stay with him. *And why would she want to stay with him*, Nick wondered. Kristen was funny and smart. Plus, she was beautiful with long red hair and bright green eyes. *She won't want to waste her time with some blind guy who can't even see her*, Nick thought bitterly. *She'll never marry me now.*

9 At first, Nick's friends came around a lot. They sat and talked with him, trying to get him to laugh at old jokes. They brought him foods he liked and often hung around for hours listening to music or reading the newspaper to Nick. They rarely mentioned basketball or the upcoming cycling races they were



training for—they thought this would make Nick sad. In fact, they rarely even mentioned Nick's blindness because it made them uncomfortable. And, in time, most of Nick's friends' discomfort with his blindness outweighed their concern for him. They ran out of things to talk about. One by one, most of Nick's friends faded away.

Now Nick became angry and depressed. He felt betrayed and abandoned by friends, and he declined into self-pity. Nick might have sunk all the way to rock bottom if it had not been for Kristen. During that very difficult first year, Kristen never wavered in her devotion to Nick. She helped him in any way she could, even when Nick's frustration made it hard for her to help him.

"I'm blind!" he'd sometimes shout angrily. "Why are you ruining your life by staying with me? I'm no good anymore. Why don't you go find someone who

can see you—someone who doesn't have to be treated like a baby?"

12 More than anything, Nick hated his loss of independence. He'd always prided himself on the fact that he was never afraid to try new things and go to new places. Sometimes on long weekend bike rides, Nick would make himself get lost intentionally just to see what kind of adventure it might turn into. Now he couldn't even walk to the corner store without Kristen's help.

13 Kristen knew that Nick needed to feel some sense of independence, or he would only become angrier and sadder. As it was, he often spent entire days doing little more than listening to the radio, sleeping, and drinking beer—something he'd rarely done before. So when Kristen came across an article about a local center for disabled veterans, she mentioned it to Nick.

14 "It's a way for you to meet other men and women like yourself," Kristen explained. "And there's all kinds of help there to get you trained and prepared for a new career."

15 "Career?" Nick asked doubtfully. "What could I do without my eyes?"

16 Kristen walked over and took Nick's hands in hers. "A lot, Nick," she said quietly. "Why don't you go and find out?"

17 Nick agreed to give it a try. There was only one catch. The center didn't open until 9:00, and since Kristen had to be at work at 8:30, she would not be able to drive Nick there every day.

18 "Nick, the city bus stops right in front of the center," Kristen said

carefully. "Why don't you learn how to take the bus?"

"Take the bus?" Nick replied angrily. 19 "How would I even know where I was going? What if I get lost? I feel like you're abandoning me—just like all my friends did."

Kristen thought Nick might 20 respond like this, so she had already figured out a plan. "Look," she said, "I'll make some arrangements at work. I'll ride the bus with you for a week or so until you get the hang of it. What do you think of that?"

It took a little more convincing, 21 but Nick finally decided to try. And, actually, he was excited about the idea of something new—something he could do on his own.

And so, for a week and a half, Nick 22 and Kristen took the bus together across town. She helped him use his cane to feel for the curb, the bus steps, and the aisle to his seat. They counted the number of stops it took to get from their apartment to the center, and when they arrived, Kristen helped Nick find the sidewalk that led to the center's front door. If Nick stumbled or became confused, Kristen was there to smooth things over and encourage her boyfriend along.

Finally, Nick felt sufficiently^o 23 confident to ride the bus alone. He'd been enjoying the time spent at the center, and he was looking forward to being independent again. But now as Nick sat on the bus alone for the first time, he wasn't so sure. He heard the little girl ask her mother again what was wrong with the man with the funny

cane. Nick took a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

24 *Two, three, four . . .* Nick counted the stops. Very carefully, he got off at the seventh stop. Just like every day with Kristen, Nick used his cane to walk over the curb and to the sidewalk to the center. His heart was pounding. What if he was going the wrong way? What if he fell? No one was there to help him.

25 “Hey, Nick! Good to see you.” Relief flooded Nick. It was one of the instructors at the center. He’d made it!

26 At the end of his first week of riding alone, Nick was hardly nervous at all. Every day had gone well. Only one time had he tripped on the curb, but almost instantly the hand of a stranger had gripped his shoulder to keep him from falling. Nick had said thank you, but the stranger just patted him on the back.

27 Now as Nick carefully made his way down the steps of the bus, the bus driver said, “You sure are one lucky young man.”

28 At first, Nick wasn’t sure if the bus driver was talking to him. Why would

anyone think he was lucky? “Me?” Nick asked.

“Yes, you!” the driver said with a friendly laugh. 29

“Why do you say that?” 30

“Well, to have someone looking out for you like that,” the driver explained. “Making sure you’re okay.” 31

“What are you talking about?” Nick asked. 32

“You know,” the driver said, sounding a little puzzled by Nick’s question. “That pretty woman with the red hair—the one who has been standing on the corner waiting and watching for you every day this week. The one who caught you when you almost fell.” 33

Nick was too stunned to say anything at first. Then tears filled his eyes behind his dark glasses. 34

The driver chuckled again and said, “I wish my wife cared that much about me!” 35

Nick smiled through his tears. “She’s not my wife,” he said quietly. “But she’s going to be.” 36

First Impressions

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Nick's girlfriend didn't let him know that she was watching for him every day at the center?
3. Have you ever known someone like Nick who was disabled in some way? What was his or her outlook on life?

Vocabulary Check

- D 1. In the excerpt below, the word *trickled* means
- A. waited.
 - B. held.
 - C. pulled.
 - D. dripped.

Sweat drips off one's forehead when one is nervous.

"Gratefully, Nick eased into the first set of seats reserved for the disabled. A thin rivulet of sweat trickled down Nick's forehead, and his hands shook." (Paragraph 4)

- C 2. In the excerpt below, the word *pastimes* means
- A. bad habits.
 - B. responsibilities.
 - C. enjoyable activities.
 - D. promotions.

For many people, spending time cycling and playing basketball with friends are enjoyable activities.

"Two of Nick's favorite pastimes had been cycling and playing basketball, and that's how he had met a lot of his friends. Now he wouldn't be able to do either." (Paragraph 7)

- A 3. In the excerpt below, the word *declined* means
- A. fell.
 - B. climbed.
 - C. became angry.
 - D. refused.

Synonym clue: *sunk*.

"Nick . . . felt betrayed and abandoned by friends, and he declined into self-pity. Nick might have sunk all the way to rock bottom if it had not been for Kristen." (Paragraph 10)

- B 4. In the excerpt below, the word *wavered* means
- gestured.
 - hesitated.
 - started.
 - damp.

The words *helped him in any way she could* suggest that Kristen never hesitated in her devotion.

“During that very difficult first year, Kristen never wavered in her devotion to Nick. She helped him in any way she could . . .” (Paragraph 10)

Reading Check

Central Point and Main Ideas

- B 1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
- Nick, a blind vet, returns home from the war to find his world turned upside down.
 - Kristen’s solid devotion to Nick helps Nick through a very difficult time, proving that love can overcome even the greatest obstacles.
 - Nick ultimately decides to marry Kristen after he realizes what she’s done for him and how much she really loves him.
 - The journey of the disabled veteran is a difficult one, and it is not unusual for friends to disappear just when the vet needs them most.

Answer A covers only paragraphs 1–8. Answer C covers only paragraphs 35–36. Answer D covers only paragraph 9.

- D 2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 8?
- Nick and Kristen were very close before he was blinded, but now she’s begun to pull away.
 - Nick is worried that if he can’t even see Kristen’s beauty, she won’t want to be with him.
 - Nick suddenly realizes that Kristen will probably not want to marry him now.
 - Because he is blind, Nick fears that Kristen will leave him.

Answer A is not supported. Answer B covers only sentences 7–8. Answer C covers only the last sentence.

- D 3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 9?
- Nick’s friends felt reluctant to talk about his blindness, because it made them uncomfortable.
 - Because Nick could no longer play basketball or cycle, his friends had to think of other things to do with him when they visited.
 - Nick’s friends came around fairly often, but Nick could tell they were going to slowly disappear.
 - At first, Nick’s old friends came to visit him, but because his blindness bothered them, they began to fade away.

Answer A covers only sentences 5–6. Answer B covers only sentences 2–3. Answer C is not supported.

Supporting Details

- C 4. How long had Nick been blind by the time he was able to ride the bus alone?
- A. Three months
 - B. Half a year
 - C. A little over a year See paragraph 6.
 - D. Two years
- B 5. To help walk over curbs and climb the steps on the bus, Nick
- A. asked Kristen to help him.
 - B. used his cane to feel for them. See paragraphs 4, 22, and 24.
 - C. counted his footsteps.
 - D. asked the bus driver to help him.

Inferences

- C 6. We can infer that the bus driver
- See paragraph 33. If the driver is puzzled by Nick's question, he must have assumed that Nick would know what he was referring to.
- A. had known Nick before he started riding the bus.
 - B. was unwilling to help Nick when he boarded the bus.
 - C. thought that Nick knew Kristen had been the one who caught him when he fell.
 - D. does not get along well with his wife.
- C 7. The reading suggests that
- See paragraph 10.
- A. Nick's friends should not be blamed for feeling uncomfortable and leaving him alone.
 - B. the loss of his friends finally sent Nick over the edge.
 - C. Nick was more angry than sad about losing his friends.
 - D. true friendships with others can survive in spite of hardships.
- D 8. From this selection, we can conclude that Kristen
- A. had never doubted she would remain Nick's girlfriend.
 - B. often grew impatient with Nick's self-pity and anger.
 - C. would have broken up with Nick if he had refused to go to the veterans' center.
 - D. was worried, at first, about Nick taking the bus to the center alone.

The fact that Kristen secretly watched Nick the first week (paragraphs 26–33) supports this inference.

The Writer's Craft

- B 9. What technique does Hoffman use to end “The Blind Vet”?
- The reader does not know that Kristen has been watching Nick until the driver tells Nick (paragraph 33).
- Mystery: we don’t know what will happen to Kristen and Nick
 - Surprise: we learn that Kristen was waiting on the corner to make sure Nick got to the center
 - Shock: we find out that Nick isn’t really blind after all
 - Humor: we smile at the bus driver’s comment about his wife
- A 10. What do you think was the author’s purpose in writing “The Blind Vet”?
- To entertain readers with an inspirational story about overcoming an obstacle
 - To inform readers of the particular problems a blind vet faces after returning from combat
 - To persuade readers that veterans need more support services
 - All of the above *The author describes how Nick overcame the obstacle of his blindness with the loving help of Kristen.*

Discussion Questions

- Why do children stare at and talk loudly about people who, like the blind vet, are different in some way? Aside from the standard “It’s not polite to stare/point/talk,” how would you explain to a child why he or she should not stare or point at someone who looks different or behaves differently?
- How do you think you would feel and react if one of your closest friends suddenly became disabled in some way? Would you find it difficult to be with him or her?
- Do you think Kristen’s behavior toward Nick is how most people would react to a loved one becoming disabled? Or do you think this is an unusual, even unbelievable, story? Explain.
- Consider this bit of scripture from the Bible: “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.” What do these words mean to you? How might they apply to “The Blind Vet”?

Paragraph Assignments

1. Has someone—for example, a friend, teacher, coach, or parent—ever believed in you and patiently urged you on in spite of your own self-doubt or frustration? Write a paragraph about this experience. Be sure to provide specific details as you answer these questions in your paragraph:
 - Who helped you?
 - Why were you feeling doubtful or frustrated?
 - How did this person help you?
 - What was the outcome?
 - What did you learn from this experience?
2. Most of Nick’s friends disappeared one by one, because they felt uncomfortable being around someone who was blind. They weren’t sure how to act or what to do. In general, many of us tend to be a little awkward around people with disabilities. However, there are things we can do to put both the disabled person and ourselves at ease—and stop friendships from fading away. Write a paragraph that gives several tips on how to feel at ease with a disabled friend or acquaintance. To get some ideas, try Googling phrases such as “how to interact with disabled people” or “supporting someone with a disability.” When giving advice, offer an example to make the advice clear.

Essay Assignments

1. Hoffman writes, “More than anything, Nick hated his loss of independence.” Most of us take our ability to do whatever we want for granted. We never question being able to take a trip, drive a car, or even make meals for ourselves, since it’s what we’re used to. What would you miss most if, due to a disability, you no longer could do whatever you wanted? Write an essay in which you detail three aspects of your life that you would particularly miss if, like Nick, you had to rely on others to take care of you.

Alternatively, if you personally know someone who has become disabled, write an essay about the changes you have seen in this person. You could write about an elderly person whose loss of vision, hearing, or mobility now keeps him or her from doing some of the things he or she used to love to do—or a younger person who, like Nick, has suffered an injury and can no longer enjoy life in the same way. Choose three different things you know this person can no longer do, and

devote a paragraph to describing each one. Include details about what he or she may have said to you about loss of independence and how he or she is coping with these changes.

2. Obviously, returning from war with a serious disability would make life very difficult for a veteran. But many veterans who have suffered no physical injuries at all still find it quite difficult to settle back into civilian life. Their difficulties range from nightmares to depression to problems finding employment to inability to adapt to the sudden freedoms of non-military life.

Write an essay in which you present and describe three different reasons that some veterans struggle with returning to civilian life. If you need to do some research, a Google search of key phrases such as “problems veterans face when returning home” or “difficulties adjusting to civilian life” will provide a great many ideas and articles on this topic.