

The yellow light reflects off the eyeglass-shaped ornaments that hang from the ceiling. My face is parallel to the floor, and my hands shake as I hold the plunger to my eye.

“Take a deep breath,” my optometrist (and new best friend) says. “No one gets it right the first try.”

I roll my shoulders to shake off the bad juju, place the lens on the insertion device, fill it with saline, and blink. It's in! But I am scared to open my eyes as millions of *what-ifs* buzz around my head, all resulting in a dystopian future where I'm left without sight.

In 2023, I was diagnosed with Keratoconus, a degenerative eye disease that distorts my vision. Letters blur together until they're unintelligible, and halos surround every light I view. My case is so severe that without surgery and custom-fit contact lenses, I'm legally blind in one eye, with the other eye headed toward the same fate.

The journey from diagnosis to treatment was complex, and I was stuck in medical limbo, distraught and unsure of what to expect. Simple pleasures like reading my beloved young adult novels were almost impossible. Learning lines for my school's fall play felt insurmountable. As the lead, I pressured myself to memorize dialogue quickly to support the cast. For weeks, I fluctuated between wallowing in self-despair and turning to humor to cope. Always the actor, I sometimes performed a dramatic bit where I'd approach my mom, bring my hands to her cheeks, and say, “Mom is that you?” Laughter helped, but it wasn't a cure.

Despite my anxiety, I pushed through to succeed. The lines were memorized, and I maintained my grades with helpful teachers who printed enlarged handouts. I even began to have a series of mini-revelations about my circumstances. While sitting on my deck one afternoon, a gentle breeze tickled my face. I adore the natural world, and like so many times before, I inhaled deeply, but somehow the air smelled sweeter. This may sound sappy, but I recall thinking that the world offers small gifts we often overlook. My compromised vision made daily life harder, but I could still relish the simplicity of nature.

It was not lost on me that my younger self might have crumbled in the face of this adversity, however, “the more mature me” resolved to confront my new reality with grace and a morsel of teenage wisdom. My science teachers taught me that we're all animals floating on a rock in space for approximately 80 years, less than a blip in the grand scheme of things. This truth helped me cherish small moments, and I vowed I wouldn't allow my eyes to deter me from achieving my goals.

Now I relish my drive to work, belting out Taylor Swift tunes, and I'm thankful I can see well enough to operate a car. I enjoy my bedroom, a haven to rest, catch up on politics

and Netflix, or research my latest burning scientific question. A life-size cardboard cutout of my celebrity crush, Kit Connor, stands in the corner, and the walls are adorned with posters of shows I've acted in. Fake plants hang from my ceiling; despite my devotion to nature, I cannot seem to care for real ones. I'm grateful for this space I have created.

My Keratoconus taught me to cultivate an appreciation for life and my unwavering determination. I simply won't get stuck in the myopic view. I must remain diligent in school, patient with those who are unfamiliar with my condition, and focus on the path ahead. If everything always went my way, I'd have 20/20 vision and live in a castle in the Scottish Highlands. But alas, I do not, so I will wake up each morning with blurry vision, put in my contacts, and peek in the mirror, grateful that I can look the world in the eye.