

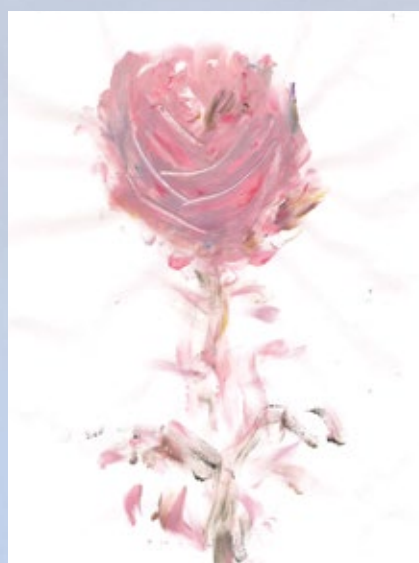
# THIRD WIND

While robbing a woman of her sight, a chronic disease brings unexpected gifts.

*"I was blissfully unaware that I was slowly going blind."*



Yellow Flower



Peach Rose



Tree on Green Wood



Cat Tails



Yellow Landscape

by Tammy Ruggles

Freelance writer, artist, and retired social worker

I was born with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP), an eye disease that has been ever so slowly robbing me of my vision as the rods and cones in my eyes gradually die off.

I got my first pair of glasses at the age of two, so I grew up knowing my vision was below average. Sometimes I felt self-conscious and embarrassed, like when I had to sit next to the teacher's desk so I could see the blackboard.

As a child, I never realized how bad my eyesight would eventually become, and my family didn't make a big deal of it. I largely enjoyed my youth

without the weight of RP's full meaning.

As I grew into adulthood, my glasses became thicker, and it became more and more challenging to read regular-size print. I also learned more about the incurability of the disease and what lay ahead. I tried not to think about the future, which seemed too dark and uncertain. It was easier living in denial.

I attended college with the financial assistance of Office for the Blind and majored in social work, with electives in art and writing — both hobbies from my early years that I loved.

After college my childhood sweetheart and I had a son. Ten years later my little boy's dad died in an auto accident.

Overnight I became a single mom, in a world that was literally and figuratively getting darker. Fortunately, mothering came easy to me, and I cherished every minute of it, which helped me keep a positive attitude.

**20/200**

But that positive attitude sometimes put me in a Pollyanna-style bubble — part denial, part naïveté, part unrelenting optimism. So it was a shock-

ing blow when, at the age of 40, my eye doctor told me my vision had deteriorated to the point of legal blindness.

*He has to be wrong, I thought. My vision is bad, yes, but **this** bad?*

Reality hit me full force as I lost my driver's license and my cherished social work position.

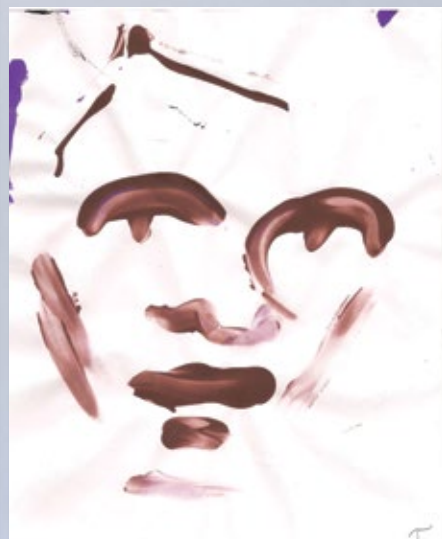
My world was cracking beneath my feet like thin ice. My loss of vision was secondary to the loss of my independence, my job and my identity.

I wasn't sure what to do, but my then 14-year-old son still needed a mom and a breadwinner. I grieved





Big Red Rose



Brown Face



America



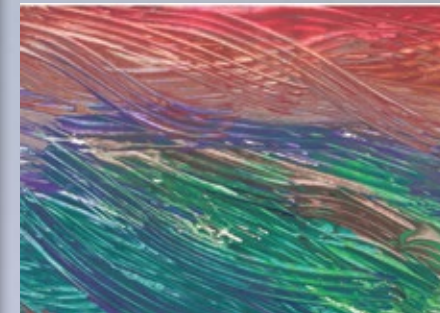
Red Barn 2



Fall Wind



Spring Bouquets



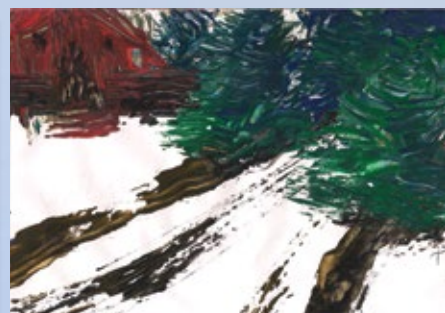
Lost at Sea



Summer Flowers



Red Shack by Water



Red Cabin in the Snow

the losses, then buckled down and set about getting my second wind.

I wondered if I could make a second career of writing. With absolutely nothing to lose, I wrote a few parenting articles in large font and sent them to my local newspaper. The editor liked my work, and I was given my own column, "TR's Topics," which launched a freelance writing career.

Meanwhile, my vision continued to deteriorate. My son set me up with a 47-inch TV that doubled as my computer monitor. Miraculously, the enlarged images made it possible to see enough to draw again, something I hadn't been able to see well enough to do since college.

I started with celebrity sketches, which I could view on the monitor

and recreate on paper. I had to use a black Sharpie, because I saw best in high contrast and pencil or charcoal were invisible to me. It created a new graphic-novel style that I liked.

I found myself sketching like a fiend, not knowing how long I would see well enough to do it. That uncertainty made it seem all the more precious.

#### 20/400

My vision held at 20/200 for two or three years, and then people began telling me that my portraits weren't as good as they used to be. I knew they were right, and I suspected why. But the news from the doctor was worse than I had thought.

My vision was now 20/400.

Losing the ability to see and draw

detail made it impossible to continue sketching. I tried to accept the loss with as much grace as I could.

"It was good while it lasted," I remarked on Facebook.

I would miss art, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. I had taken it as far as I could.

Or so I thought.

It was a Facebook friend named

Sonja who suggested I try finger painting, explaining it was something I could do intuitively.

Doubt hung heavy, but art meant so much to me; I had to try. I bought some bottles of acrylic paint and a pad of art paper, and I took them home.

How could I do this? I could barely tell the colors apart. Brown looked like purple. Blue blended with green.





People at a Ball Game



People at an Art Gallery



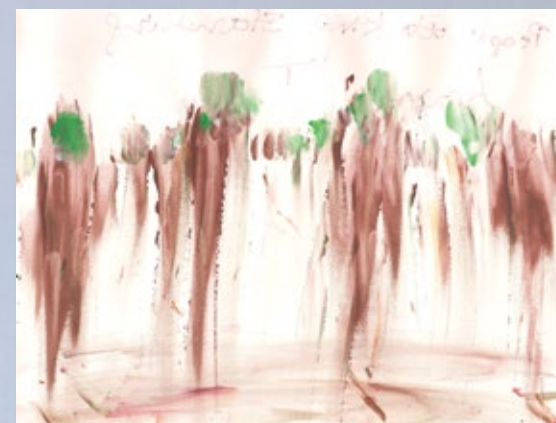
People Sightseeing



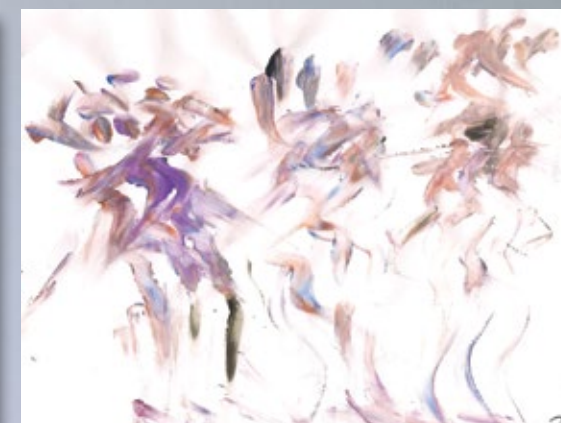
People Working in a Field



Sail Boats



People Standing Around



People Dancing



Tammy Ruggles

Red sometimes looked orange.

I devised a system where I put colors in a certain order so I could remember which was which. I worked up the nerve to show my first attempts to some close friends. Reactions varied from "I'm not sure what that is" to "Keep doing it!"

The process of learning this new art form forced me to look at my abilities,

and the very nature of art itself, in a new way.

I had been hung up on visual art being the domain of sighted artists, with the visually impaired being constrained to art that was sculpted or tactile.

I had also been hung up on the idea that my pictures had to be perfect. But art doesn't have to be perfect to be effective. Once I accepted that, I also,

reluctantly, recognized that RP, once again, had opened me up to a new artistic style.

### Third Wind

With growing confidence I began showing my pictures to local artists and gallery owners, which led to a few of my paintings being included in exhibits. I even sold a couple of large

canvas paintings at a sidewalk sale.

And then, after I taught finger painting to a group of children in a community outreach program, I was invited to speak to a group of local art teachers on ways to teach art to blind and visually impaired students.

Bad eyesight puns aside, I did not see this coming. I had thought my art was for myself, created for almost

selfish, personal reasons, strictly for self-fulfillment.

What I see now is that my artistic journey has given me a way to help others. My loss of sight has given me insight into the very nature of being human, with all its joys and losses. I have been given the gift of my artwork, a gift I can share with the world. ♦