

LIGHTS OUT: LIVING IN A SIGHTLESS WORLD
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(excerpt: Chapter 3)

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LIGHTS FLICKERING

Mid-June. Fat, full leaves filled the oaks and maples climbing on our mountains. My bare feet sank into lush grass as Matt, Staci, and I ran all over the neighborhood. We'd been cooped up in classrooms for far too long; now, finally, the freedom of summer break seeped into our bones. My first year of middle school flashed in the rearview; truth be told, it presented a fairly decent image.

I'd begun to taste "real" sports – playing Optimist league football for the Greenwaves and Optimist league basketball. Pretty soon, I'd become a middle-school football player for the Redhounds.

Life rocked.

And the future held nothing but promise.

My bags sat by the bedroom doorway, packed and ready for a brand new camp.

Away from home.

Camp Bethel Ministries in Wise, Virginia is every twelve-year-old kid's dream. A shallow, muddy creek running between two green banks, its waters the color of chocolate milk. Tires and logs cutting through or over the muck at regular intervals provide tests for kids to prove their mettle. Archery. Human bowling. Slip and slides. A lake, complete with a rope swing that let any brave kid sail through the air for a split second before gravity took over and landed him in the water. Sermons and music that sounded interesting and applicable to my twelve-year-old self. Knot-tying. Throwing axes at enormous pieces of wood. Shooting. Basketball. Kickball. Canoeing. Paddle-boating. Volleyball in the sand.

I loved every single second of it.

The lights were on and blazing in my life. Every day brought a new adventure. A ropes course to tackle. A wall to climb. A laugh to enjoy and an experience to have. Each night, I fell into bed, slept hard, dreamt of the football glory to come in the fall, and woke up ready to do it all again the next day.

I returned home on Saturday.

By Wednesday, my headache began.

Wednesday

Suddenly, shards of darkness splintered through the bright lights of life. Explosions of pain sent shrapnel flying through my mind. Mom came home from work to find me lying on the couch in a darkened living room, trying hard to not move my head. She and Dad stuffed me full of headache medicines – feeble shields against the onslaught behind my eyes.

I probably just needed some rest from the whirlwind of camp activity. A deluge of outdoor fun—even for a kid who rarely sat still—should be followed by time to get your bearings. Late nights and early mornings will have their way, whether a boy acknowledges it or not. I needed rest.

At least, that's what I hoped. Mom wondered otherwise, called the doctor, and made an appointment for the next day.

But my good intentions of recovering flew out the window, set in flight by an invitation from Uncle Durk and Aunt Sandra to come swim. Sleep could wait another day. What kid says no to swimming? Not this one.

I pulled on my suit and trudged to the car, pushing my feet forward despite the pounding waves in my head. The sight of the sun-dappled water beckoned me. My spirit willed it well – but my flesh roared back its negation.

I meagerly sat on the chaise lounge. As I leaned over into a prone position, I closed my eyes against the promise of the water and pulled a towel over my head.

Tomorrow. I'll feel better tomorrow. Just need to rest.

Thursday

On Thursday, my headache and I walked slowly to my grandmother's while Mom and Dad went to work. The walk felt miles longer than it should, each step dogged by the glaring summer sun overhead. I finally arrived at my grandmother's front door and escaped into the shaded sanctuary of her living room. She could tell I didn't feel well and offered me all manner of grandmotherly love—hugs, cookies, TV time. All I wanted, though, was to lay on the stillness and quiet of her couch.

Mom found me on that couch when she arrived after work. Alarm sizzled down her spine. What was this? Travis, lying down, in the middle of the day? First the poolside, towel-covered incident and now this. She listened to my grandmother tell her about the quietest, stillest day of my life as she glanced back and forth from Mamaw to me. Comprehension of the scene before her wouldn't come. One day down, okay. But two days? In a row?

She placed her cool hand on my forehead. Nothing but skin met her inquiring touch. No fever. No tell-tale clamminess. Her motherly instinct rose up and demanded medical attention.

Mom hustled me out to the car, shielding my gaze from the still-scorching sun as she reclined the seat. She pointed our vehicle toward the local doctor's office.

I didn't feel like going to the doctor. I felt like lying in bed very still with all the lights off. The fun and adventure I'd enjoyed just a couple days prior seemed very far away now. Jumping in a lake and flying on a rope swing felt worlds away, painful even to picture in my mind's eye.

I pushed against the fear that welled up each time I wondered: what could cause this kind of pain in just two days?

We entered the doctor's office, and Mom marched toward the receptionist's window. I blocked out the sound and lights as much as I could, wanting only to get to the doctor, find out the problem, and fix it. A nurse opened the door and called my name—too loud!—and we stood. The nurse guided us to an exam room, and I obediently climbed up on the paper-covered table.

The doctor entered. He prodded my neck, checked my ears, looked in my throat, and asked me some questions.

I mumbled answers.

He asked Mom questions.

She answered, though I didn't listen.

A few words came from the doctor.

Many came from Mom.

“You're just an overprotective parent,” I heard him say.

I wanted to scream, “My mom is *not* overprotective!” I wanted to tell him about how she let me ski solo at four and run all over our neighborhood by myself and with friends and how she let me go off to camp just a week ago.

I didn’t speak, though. Speaking shattered what meager peace still existed behind my eyes.

We quietly, slowly drove home. I walked into the house, careful to keep my head as straight and level as possible, and lay down gingerly on my bed. Mom doped me up with Tylenol, and I pushed away the fear again.

What beast had invaded my brain? When? How? What allowed it? What would remove it? I’d never hurt like this.

I kept my eyes closed and asked God for sleep.

Friday

When I woke on Friday, the internal bombs felt more like firecrackers, so Mom dropped me off at my grandmother’s again and drove to work. Memaw mothered over me as she’d done the day before. My desire to play warred with my worry that if I did, I’d set off the mental landmines again.

The day passed with no new explosions. Mom returned to find me up and about, if somewhat subdued. Encouraged by any evidence of my returning health, she announced we were going to the movies. *Jurassic Park!*

As we entered the darkened theater with Snickers and Butterfingers in hand, I buried the residual fear and resolved to focus on the coming entertainment. Camp hangover. Had to be. Not worth another thought, I told myself. Too much sun. That could be it. I settled into the comfy padded seat and prepared to be amazed. Mom offered me the candy, but—for the first time ever—I didn’t really want it.

I ignored her worried look to focus on the screen. Loud, thumping noises reverberated through the theatre. I stared at the pitch-black screen. Red words faded into being—JURASSIC PARK—and out again.

Insects buzzed. The black faded once more to reveal tall stalks of a plant at night. Flash on the face of a concerned man in an orange hardhat. Skip back to the palm tree swaying against the moonlight of a dark sky. Thunder rumbled. More concerned men in their orange hardhats.

Zoom in on a man in a fedora wielding a serious-looking silver shotgun. Back to the palm trees where now it’s apparent that something huge is on the move behind them. An enormous *thing*.

A cage is brought in on a forklift. Men yell instructions all around. The thing in the cage snorts. Growls. Squeals. Heavy. Foreboding. Fedora man urges the hardhat men to go once more toward the cage. They obey, pushing the crate up against a gate. Fedora man commands, “Open the gate!”

The thing suddenly pushes its crate back from the gate. A hardhat man is dragged halfway inside the cage. That thing has the human! The music crescendos, shrieking danger.

Fedora man dashes forward, holding onto hardhat man. He throws himself into the tug of war while yelling for the remaining hardhat men to, “Shoot her! Shoot her!”

Fade off to a scene of tranquil water.

A man doesn’t forget the last movie he’ll ever see.

Anyone who has watched *Jurassic Park* knows that the grand idea doesn’t turn out very grand. I hung on through every twist and turn in the jungle. Each time a dinosaur foot pounded

down, I heard it. Each screech of a pterodactyl seared through my brain. Every single scream of, “Help!” or, “Run!” caught my ears and glued my eyes to the screen. I didn’t turn away. I hung in until that helicopter flew away with the survivors and we panned out over the gently rolling waters to watch a flock of seagulls soaring along.

Then I gave in and turned to Mom.

“My headache’s back.”

Saturday

Saturday morning, as soon as we woke, Mom called our local doctor again.

“Travis’ headache still hasn’t gone away,” she told the nurse. “It’s been four days and it’s getting worse. I really think he needs to be seen again.”

“Give him some Tylenol,” they said. “He’ll be all right. It’s to be expected with a boy his age, approaching puberty.”

Mom hung up with a huff I could hear clear to my bedroom.

Worry invaded my mind again. I told it to hush.

Sunday

Sunday morning dawned and we trudged to church. The chore of getting dressed—thinking through what I would even wear—felt insurmountable. I ended up wearing the first thing my hands touched. Who cared if it didn’t match? Surely a lifetime of matching Sundays would make up for this one.

We entered church, and I wanted to hang out with my friends. I wanted to care about the words coming from their mouths, but the pounding behind my eyes wouldn’t allow it. The pews loomed before me as makeshift beds, a welcome sanctuary.

For the first time in a while, I settled into Mom’s side and stayed there through the service. Her warmth and the hush of a holy gathering created a cocoon into which I willingly fell. At the final, “Amen,” Mom, Dad, and I avoided our usual routine of sticking around to catch up with folks. No desire for after-church lunch or get-together existed.

We arrived back home, and I fell into the dark safety of bed.

I think Mom and Dad would have skipped service later that night—very uncharacteristic of us—except for my determination to attend. While I hadn’t been able to practice with the children’s choir due to camp and my ongoing headache, I didn’t want to miss the chance to support my friends as *they* sang. The headache would end at some point, and I didn’t want to be left with the disappointment of having missed their performance.

So at 7 p.m., I put on my green shorts and burnt orange shirt, and we once again drove down the hill to the church.

I didn’t make it through the performance.

The sound, the lights, and the noise of the crowd combined into one giant sledgehammer intent on banging my brain out of my skull. I stumbled out the door and down the hallway, just trying to get away. I looked up and saw Mom coming toward me. I buried my head in her shoulder and bawled, hoping the pain would escape with the tears.

Mom grabbed Dad and hustled us to the car. Baptist Regional Medical Center Emergency Room, here we come.

I got some relief at the ER that night. A shot of Demerol can have that effect. But Demerol washes out like the tide at night, and when it did, the headache crashed on the shores of my

mind. I couldn't spend the rest of my life on Demerol. We needed someone to determine the *cause* of the headache.

While the drug dripped its waves of ease into my veins, Mom and Dad talked with the doctor.

No cause could be identified. I demonstrated migraine symptoms, so I received a diagnosis of a migraine and treatment for such.

With the pain back out to sea, we returned to the oasis of home and hoped Monday would find me miraculously cured.

It didn't.

Monday

Mom called the local pediatrician on Monday, explaining that I'd now had a migraine for five days and she felt fairly certain that shouldn't be chalked up to puberty or treated with Tylenol. I listened to the worry lacing her voice as she let the nurse know of our ER run the night before. Could we get a referral to a specialist in Lexington?

She was denied.

I have the advantage now of knowing what's coming. In the early years of aftermath, I wondered sometimes if—at any point in my headache saga—someone had made a decision to look further for a cause, my life would have turned out differently. It's easy to get lost in the darkness of what-if because it holds an illusion of control. It places responsibility for outcome in the hands of humans. It lets us think that we can take an action and expect a given reaction.

We don't live in that kind of world. I can step off the roof of a building. I very well may hit the ground and be road pizza. Or, at just the time I step off, an enormous gust of wind could come and push me back onto the rooftop. Or someone else could have entered the roof at just that time, saw and comprehended my plan, and jerked me back to safety. Or. Or. Or. If. If. If.

The space between oases is riddled with cracks. We all fall through them at one time or another. How far we fall and what we land on gives us our stories.

Turns out I have two parents who don't tend to take no for an answer from a doctor who is ignoring parental concern. Just as Mom hung through her desert to a diagnosis as a teenager, she'd see me through this journey somehow. If a way existed, she and Dad would find it. Isn't that how they'd gotten me in the first place?

When Mom called Dad at work on Monday to say our local doctor saw no reason to refer me to Lexington, Dad took a little walk.

Right into the insurance office at his company.

Debbie Baceleri greeted him and invited him into her office. He sat and explained to her what I'd been experiencing. As he shared the ongoing saga, Debbie's forehead creased. She grew still. She didn't blink.

Dad finished. "And so we can't get a referral to Lexington, and we're not sure what else to do."

Debbie sat up straight and reached for her phone. This didn't sound right. She dialed Marna, their on-staff nurse, and asked Marna to join her and Dad in the office.

Dark-haired Marna arrived, and Dad began the story anew. She crossed her arms, leaning on the desk and staring intently as Dad shared his concern that his boy—previously never still—now lay on the couch in darkened rooms holding his head.

Marna looked through her glasses at Dad and back to Debbie. “He needs to see a doctor in Lexington.”

Debbie agreed, picked up the phone again, and called Dr. Robinson’s office in Lexington.

Dr. Robinson was on vacation, so Debbie arranged an appointment with Dr. Blake for the very next day. Dad thanked Debbie profusely—hope! —and arrived home to triumphantly give Mom and me the good news.

Debbie and Marna—stars in the desert’s night sky.

Tuesday

On Tuesday, Dad left work early to join Mom (who got off at 2 p.m.) in taking me to Lexington. Misery had invaded my world so insidiously, I hardly cared who we saw, only that someone tell us the problem and fix it. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. It hurt to open my eyes. The pain cascaded through every facet of my mind. Everything I did made it hurt worse. Movement. Thinking. Breathing.

I whiled away the hours, reminding myself of the hope that lay on the horizon. Just over the hill of this stretch of desert lay the promise of a doctor’s appointment. Surely, surely we would be granted the refreshing experience of an answer.

As the sun began its descent, we piled into our 1987 gold Celebrity and hit the road for the hour-and-a-half drive to Lexington. We were to be Dr. Blake’s last appointment of the day. I lay in the backseat, breathing with purpose, counting breaths and guesstimating how many more I could take between here and the doctor. I needed to throw up, but I didn’t want to because I just knew it’d make my head hurt worse.

Internally giving up the battle, I sat up and leaned into the front seat to ask Dad to pull over so I could puke.

I never got the words out.

Somehow I threw up into the front seat and did not get any on my parents, but I filled the space between them. We pulled over anyway, and Mom managed to clean off the seat as best she could while murmuring repeatedly, “It’s okay, Travis. It’ll all be fine.” She cared less about being clean and more about getting to the doctor before he left for the day. We rolled down the windows to whisk away the stench and motored on toward the Lexington Clinic.

As soon as we met Dr. Blake, a sense of relief swept through our anxious little clan. He came into the little exam room, filling up the rest of the available space. He sat down and looked at me first. Just looked. Then, as he checked my glands and gave me a thorough exam, he said, “Tell me what’s been going on with Travis.”

Dr. Blake kept up a running list of questions and conversation with Mom and Dad. When did I eat last? When did this start? Did it get worse at certain times of the day? Did it ever go away? Had I wrestled with migraines in the past? What had I been doing when it started? Were there changes to my usual behavior?

Dad and Mom unloaded the whole story. How I’d been fine at camp, then woke up with a headache on Wednesday that hadn’t gone away, only wavered between bad and horrible. About calling the doctor, then going to the doctor, and being mostly dismissed.

When he heard that little tidbit, his hands stilled on my neck and he turned toward Mom. “They said what?”

Mom clarified that we’d basically been dismissed.

He couldn’t believe a pediatrician had blown us off.

I wanted to smile—finally, someone slowing down, looking at me, and seeing that something had gone off the rails in my body. Smiling, though, meant using my head and face, so I smiled inside instead.

Dr. Blake kept poking and prodding, questioning and clarifying. Finally, he sat back and sighed. “I think it’s just a headache. I don’t see anything else wrong right now.”

My heart sank. *No. You have to tell us why.*

Dr. Blake picked up on the despair that renewed its hover around us.

“Happily,” he said, “we can get rid of a headache.”

I was taken to another room, this one with a hospital bed. The IV needle barely hurt compared to my head. Soon, the bliss of Demerol again dripped through the tube and into my veins. Liquid relief poured into my desert. I refused to acknowledge that it would dry up before the pain did.

Dr. Blake gave Mom a prescription for steroids. Once the narcotic had fully escaped from the IV bag to my body, we left.

I felt good. Okay, that’s probably a given since Demerol now danced through my bloodstream. But as bad as I’d been hurting when we walked in, the sudden lack of pain had me bouncing back into regular life. I asked if we could make a stop before home and, within minutes, walked through the doors of Sports Unlimited, where I picked out an Iron Man sports watch and dared to dream about football again.

Half of summer lay behind me already. I’d be a Corbin Redhound soon! Mom and Dad, thrilled to see me taking an interest in life again, decided to extend our visit a little further with a visit to the Fifth Quarter for dinner. My stomach still felt unsettled, so I didn’t eat much, but hope that I’d finally escaped the suffocation of pain had me grinning ear to ear nearly the entire ride home.

Wednesday morning, the headache returned with a vengeance.

Wednesday

See, that’s the thing about pain. We can mask it for a while, but if we don’t get to the root of it, it’s going to come back. And when it does, we’re going to spiral back into that hopelessness of knowing we have no control and no real knowledge of what we’re dealing with.

When I opened my eyes Wednesday morning and felt the blinding pain sear across my forehead and behind my eyes, a shot of dread closely followed it. I stared at the Troy Aikman, Reggie White, and UK basketball posters on my walls as long as I could. I tried to will away the pain. To place myself back in the pain-free zone of the night before.

I didn’t want to tell Mom and Dad. I wanted it to be over. I didn’t like worrying them, and I didn’t like worrying myself. The summer kept slipping away and here I lay, just waiting on pain to leave.

But it hadn’t. For seven days. An entire week of pain. It hadn’t left. It had set up camp. Would it ever let me go?

Not by me ignoring it.

“Mom!” I called out, squinting at the volume of my own voice.

Mom appeared in my doorway. “Yeah, Travis?”

“My headache’s back.”

Handling relationships can be a delicate thing in any situation. Add to the experience that you live in a small town where today’s slight is tomorrow’s blown-out-of-proportion story at the beauty salon, and it’s a little easier to understand why Mom took the next step she did.

She did *not* call Dr. Blake in Lexington.

She called our local pediatrician again. Surely, once our local doctor heard of Dr. Blake's attention to the situation, she'd get off the "overprotective mom" list and be heard.

Mom relayed all that had happened in Lexington, ending with, "And now his headache is back and he's running a low-grade fever."

"What is his fever?"

"99.2."

"Well, we really don't consider that a fever."

It seemed my crack in the desert would widen before we found a way out.

Thursday

The next day, with the headache still in force but my fever unchanged, Mom called Dr. Blake.

"Bring him back up here," he said.

So, back into our little gold Celebrity. Back along the interstate. Back into the Lexington Clinic. Back into Dr. B's little exam room.

The lackadaisical approach of our local doctor lay dormant in the dust. Dr. B threw the force of his renewed attention at me, determined to ferret out the cause of my suffering. He ordered a spinal tap. The nurses laid me on an exam table in the fetal position and then numbed the area around my spine in the middle of my back.

"It's so important that you don't move, Travis," the nurse said. "You hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The nurse looked at Mom and Dad. "If he moves during the procedure, he could end up paralyzed."

Did she think I couldn't hear her? I squinted and focused hard on the black of my eyelids. *Don't move. Don't move. Don't move.*

A shooting pain pierced my back. *Don't move! Don't move! Don't move!*

"Breathe, honey," the nurse advised me. "Easy."

I didn't want to breathe. I wanted it to be over. Breathing meant moving. Breathe and risk being paralyzed? No, thank you. Terror flooded my system. I gritted my teeth and pictured the football field, the lake, the church—anything to keep from crying out as the needle entered my spinal column. *Don't sneeze*, I thought. *Just be still and hang on.*

I held my breath as long as I could, squeezing Mom's hand and praying for it to be over. I felt the needle leave my spine.

"All done," the nurse told Mom. "You've got a brave boy here,"

Mom agreed. "I know it."

The spinal tap revealed that my white blood count had risen a bit over normal. Combined with the headaches, Dr. B suspected I'd begun the end of a battle with viral meningitis. He told my parents, "If his temperature is 100, I'll put him in the hospital and do more tests."

My temperature sat at 99.3.

Dr. B gave me another IV of Demerol and—with nothing left to do—sent me home. Before leaving, he told my parents, "If his temperature reaches 100, I'll put him in the hospital."

We left with not only a possible diagnosis, but also a plan of action if things continued to head south. I rested in those small victories.

We'd barely been home an hour when Dr. B called to check on me.

Mom said, “His fever is still just under 100.”

At home I’d stay.

While the earth around us cracked in myriad directions, we did our best to keep a firm footing. Though my heart and hopes were firmly planted on the gridiron, I was also a little boy growing up in Kentucky and the time of year had come to do what all little boys in Kentucky do.

Dad and I parked ourselves on couches – him sitting, me lying down with eyes half closed against the TV glare – and watched the NBA draft to see which Kentucky Wildcat landed with which team.

Congratulations, Jamal Mashburn.

The drone of the overhead fan crept beneath my slumbering mind and whirred it awake. I desperately wanted it off. I stared through the gloom at it, contemplating the thought of lifting my head and reaching for the cord. Not worth the added pain. I called out for Dad.

“Yeah, Travis?” he asked from my doorway.

“Could you turn off my fan?”

“Sure.” Dad walked into my room and reached up for the cord that controlled the fan speed. Inadvertently grabbing the other chain hanging from the fixture, he pulled. Bright light flooded the room, a sudden glaring sun in the darkness.

My hand flew up to protect my eyes. Too much force.

I hit my left eye hard and cried out as pain exploded not only in my face, but also behind my eye.

“Travis! Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I assured Dad as best I could, with bowling balls knocking together behind my eye. I settled back in and tried to go to sleep.

Friday

I woke up Friday morning to the sound of Mom’s voice.

“Travis? Travis. Wake up, honey.”

I opened my eyes, already squinting against the coming pain.

Except it wasn’t there.

No pain.

None.

At all.

FINALLY! I could get back to life! Dr. B must have gotten it right. A nasty bout with viral meningitis that had finally reached its end.

“Mom, my head doesn’t hurt!” I spoke at top volume . . . because I could!

“At all?” she asked, the cordless still in her hand where Dr. B – who’d called to check on me – waited.

“At all.”

Mom reported the good news to Dr. B while I bounded out of bed.

He told her, “I really feel like this is over.”

We did, too, and breathed a sigh of relief.

I went to the bathroom and stared at my eye in the mirror. Should I tell them that it hurt? I debated internally. We’d all had enough of me being in pain. I didn’t want any more doctor time. Precious little remained of the summer, and no doubt Mom would have me sitting in an eye doctor’s office if I told her my eye hurt.

Except, well, it *hurt*. I entered the kitchen for breakfast and sighed. “Hey, guys, my eye really hurts.”

Dad told Mom about the incident with the fan.

“How bad is it?”

“Not too bad.”

“Okay, if it still hurts this afternoon, we’ll go the eye doctor.”

Good enough for me. I wanted this ordeal over and done. I wanted normalcy and typical summer mornings back. We finished up breakfast, Mom and Dad returned to work and I set off across the yards of Kentucky grass to Mamaw’s for the day.

Having been out of commission for over a week, I eagerly anticipated the return to a real summer experience hanging out with Matt and Staci.

Mamaw, though, had other plans. Her worry had only built since watching me lie quietly on her couch. “I think you should take it easy today, Travis,” she told me. “We don’t want to do too much too soon with you gallivanting all over the neighborhood and have that headache come back.”

Hindsight allows the wisdom of her words to ring crystal clear. I stayed indoors with her most of the day. Truth be told, I agreed with her a little. I didn’t want to do anything to bring back the kind of pain I’d been in for a week.

My eye hurt and, if I looked at it long enough, I could tell it had puffed up some. I decided not to look at it too long. I wanted very badly to be well.

When Mom came to pick me up that afternoon, she stared at my eye. “Does it still hurt?” she asked. “It’s very swollen.”

“Yeah, it hurts. I’m sure it’s fine, though,” I replied. “Just dumb me, whacking myself in the eye.”

Neither Mom nor I saw any connection between my swollen eye and my headaches. I’d awakened headache-free, she’d had a whole day at work, and only now had gotten a good look at an eye that had spent the day swelling.

Still, it’s probably pretty obvious by now that Mom’s vigilant about health. She took me to Dr. McClintock, our family eye doctor, to make sure I hadn’t done any significant damage.

Dr. McClintock, with his thin brown hair, khakis, and button-up shirt, is a methodical and certain man. He knows his business and he likes helping. He asked Mom what had happened and Mom—only now realizing there might be a connection—told him the whole story of the past nine days. The headaches, trips to Lexington, and how I’d at last awakened *without* a headache just this morning but *with* a sore eye from bonking myself in the head.

He examined my eye to see if I had a detached retina or some other new disaster, but found nothing. “Put ice on it,” he advised Mom. “It should be better by the morning. If it isn’t, give me a call.”

We gathered in the family room that night for a family meeting. A decision needed to be made. While I’d been lying in my bedroom for nine days, Mom and Dad had been praying not only about my condition, but also about their response to it. Mom needed to leave the next morning for the Myrtle Beach mission trip with our youth group from church. She’d already told them she couldn’t go with me in pain, but now my pain was gone. Should she go?

I’d eaten meals all day and kept them down. Aside from a swollen eye, I felt fine. Normal, even. I voted for her to go. Dad joined with me.

Mom—not having done a single bit of prepping until this point—flew into a flurry of shopping and packing.

Saturday

Wearing her purple-and-orange “Prayer Warrior” t-shirt, Mom crept into my room before the sun and kissed me goodbye.

I woke up enough to say, “Mom, be sure you bring me something back.”

She promised.

Dad took her to the church to join up with the youth group.

Mom kissed Dad goodbye and said, “I’ll call you at the first stop to make sure Travis is okay.” These were the days before cell phones and constant communication.

At 6 a.m., Mom and the youth group rolled out of the parking lot toward Myrtle Beach.

Dad returned to the house to find me sitting in the recliner with an eye that kind of looked like Muhammad Ali had done a number on it. Far from being better in a day, it had gotten worse.

Dad called Dr. McClintock with the update.

“Meet me at the office at 9,” he responded.

This time, Dr. McClintock shone a light deep into my eyes.

He gasped.

“We have to get him to UK Hospital. Immediately.”