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Ian Conwell
Denison University

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Needles In My Eyes

I don't think anyone really saw it coming. I know I didn't. It's ironic to think that now. The first time I told someone "I didn't see it coming," they chuckled. It probably wasn't a conscious thing, but I wouldn't you laugh if a blind man said he didn't see something coming? Maybe not. Well, I wasn't blind before it happened, so I would have at least had a chance to see it coming, anyway. Not that you can see a thing like blindness coming, though. What a silly thing to think. After thirty-some years of sight, you really don't expect to just wake up one morning and not be able to see.

A year ago today, I woke up blind. I didn't know I was blind, I just couldn't see. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to me, and I'm usually a pretty complacent guy. At first, I thought maybe there had been a problem in the night and the goo that pools in the corners of your eyes had just gotten a little overzealous. When I went to wipe it away with my fingers, though, the problem remained. Maybe I had an allergic reaction to something, I thought, and my mind turned to my two dogs. I'd never had a problem with animal fur before, but you never know.

I reached over to feel for my wife in the other side of the bed, but I was alone. When I finally sat up, I noticed that I wasn't completely blind, or what I thought was completely blind. I could vaguely see some light coming in through a window across the room, and some of the more pronounced objects around looked like dim shadows. Using the window as a reference, I made my way to the bathroom across the hall, managing not to mangle my toes on the obstacles strewn about the floor. I placed my hands on the cool formica surface of the sink and reached to turn on the cold water. I splashed my face several times before looking in the mirror, but all I could make out was the faded light coming from the window reflecting off the glass. I still wasn't upset yet. There's a perfectly logical explanation for this, I kept telling myself, and as it turns out, there was. I just hadn't wanted to hear it in the form of a diagnosis from an ophthalmologist.

Eventually I called down to my wife, and it was at this point that I had finally begun to panic. When she came up from cooking breakfast and found me rubbing frantically at my eyes over the sink, she must have suspected something was going on, and I could just see the concerned expression on her face. Except I couldn't. At this thought, I broke down.

"What's wrong, hon?"

"I can't see."

"What do you mean you can't see?"

"I can't see. I woke up this morning and I couldn't see a thing." I was still crying.

"What should we do?"

"I dunno, call 911?" My wife agreed, and went downstairs to the phone. Meanwhile, I continued the frenzied assault on my eyes. I splashed my face with hot water, cold water, lukewarm water, and everything in between, but each time I looked up to where I remembered the mirror had been, it only seemed a little darker. Erin came up holding the cordless phone.

"911 redirected me to the Center for Disease Control, they think it's possible that you got some sort of chemical in your eyes and they want to make sure you take some precautionary measures."

"I've been flushing my eyes out for half an hour, it would have cleared up by now." I had no idea how long you were supposed to rinse if you got chemicals in your eyes, but how long could it be? "Besides, how would I have gotten chemicals in my eyes?"

Erin was busy talking to the CDC receptionist. I could almost hear her nodding, acknowledging all the steps I would have to take, and I began to think about how I would never see my wife nodding again, or how I would never see my dogs' tails wag again, or how I would never see my own toes beyond my slightly bulging stomach. I would never see my wife's face again. I began to cry again, but I

was still rinsing, so I didn't think Erin noticed. I felt her put her hand on my bare shoulder, and I knew she had.

"They say to keep rinsing it, and wait a bit. After about an hour, she told me to take you to a specialist. You'll be fine, hon."

I continued rinsing, but I had given up hope long before I finally turned the water off. My wife had gone back down to finish breakfast, so I stumbled back into the bedroom, now mostly dark despite the daylight shining in, and sat down on the bed.

My wife came up again a few minutes later and said she had found an ophthalmologist who could take a look at me that afternoon. I made some smart comment about regretting my inability to look back. When we finally arrived, the doctor did some preliminary tests, which involved a culture of cells from my eyes, and said she'd get back to us that evening. I didn't eat anything that first day, and when it was finally time for dinner, I was famished. Erin and I had just sat down when the phone rang. I heard Erin set down her fork and walk over to where I remember the phone hanging.

"Hello?" (pause.) "Yes, this is his wife." (longer pause.) "I see." (longer pause.) "I see. Thank you." (click.) (step.) (sob.) (step.)

I felt my wife put her arms around me, and she settled her head into the space between my neck and right shoulder. I had thought I had done all my crying that morning, but I felt my stomach turn over again, and I began to cry silently. Neither of us ate dinner.

I spent the next week trying to adjust to my new "disability." I was now legally handicapped, and the United States government is all too accommodating to its debilitated citizens. When Erin called to ask about seeing-eye dog programs and red-tipped canes, she said the workers were "so friendly." I told her they'd have to be to deal with all the kind of people that must go through the programs.

Before I started my first training session with a dog, though, I backed out. I thought, despite the trainer's assurances to the contrary, that there would be trouble with my two black labs.

"These dogs are trained to ignore all external stimuli save the commands of their masters." The way he said it made him sound like he had practiced the lines thousands of times before I called, and that he was especially proud of his use of the word "stimuli."

"That may very well be the case," I told him over the phone, "but you don't know my dogs. They're young black labs, both male, and bringing a female dog into the house is completely out of the question." I didn't understand how they could simply overlook the fact that I had two young and extremely horny dogs running around my house.

"Very well, sir. I understand. Goodbye."

I hung up the phone and asked the microwave if she was going to make me get one of those stupid white and red canes. Erin turned me away from the appliance and said that if I was going to be stubborn about it, then no, she wouldn't make me get a cane. What I later found out that meant was that I would have to be accompanied by someone at all times if I ever left the house.

The prospect of never being out of the house alone really didn't bother me. As a thirty-something year old married man, there were very few social expectations of me. Sure, I had enjoyed going to a baseball game or bar every now and then with the guys, but I didn't drink much, and I had begun to lose my taste for sports before I had lost my sight anyway. What I was really going to miss was reading and writing. I made my living writing about things, things that I could taste and touch and smell and hear and see. The only problem was, I could no longer be inspired to write a poem about the way my wife would sit a certain way when she read, and I could no longer be inspired to write a short sketch about the way my dogs bounded after rodents across our backyard. Sure, I could draw from the memory of the way my wife would curl up, or from the memory of the two black blurs streaking back

and forth, but there would be no new images from this point on, or else I would simply have to make things up.

This is what I thought about every night before I went to bed. Making love to my wife was difficult, to be sure, but no less incredible than it was when I could see. Rather, it was the form of my wife that I missed. I missed all the curves, and the muscles, and the striking facial features that I so loved. Most of all I missed the smile that had won me over. I made up for this by learning to hear her smile, though.

One day, about two months into my blindness, Erin and I were talking about something relatively serious. I forget what exactly it was, probably relating to our financial situation. By this time, I had pretty much accepted my blindness for what it was, and I was focusing on my other senses, paying special attention to sounds. Specifically, I had been paying attention to the sound of Erin's voice. The nuances of a person's voice are incredible when you listen carefully, and someone's voice sounds ever so slightly different with various facial expressions. Anyway, we were talking about money or whatever, and I made some stupid wisecrack about how sad I was that I'd never again have the privilege of seeing our handsome financial advisor, John. This made Erin giggle hysterically, because John was, well, quite the unfortunate looking young man. Twenty three years old, and the man still had a face-full of pimples.

This was the first time that I really noticed, but for ten minutes or so after the comment, Erin must have had the biggest grin plastered on her face. The way her lips curled up in the smile must have affected the way she spoke, because I noticed a brighter tone in her voice, and it sounded like she was always on the verge of laughter again.

In this way, I was able to begin writing again. I wrote about sounds that triggered visual memories for me, and about smells that took me back to a certain place and time in my life. I spent the majority of this first year of my blindness adjusting my writing style to one less focused on visual details and more sensory-intensive. After about 6 months or so of darkness, I had finally gotten to where I wanted to be as a blind writer, and sight was less heavily emphasized in my work. I even began a dialogue with my agent, who, as I was pleased to hear, had not lost hope for my writing career.

On one particularly lovely-smelling autumn day, about 8 months into my blindness, I had just finished speaking to an editor at a local publishing company about sending them some work when I heard my wife came outside.

"I found something interesting in the paper today, Chris, I think you should listen to this." I heard stiff paper rustling a few feet from where I was sitting on the porch, as my wife shuffled through to find the article. She began to read: "Unorthodox surgeon sparks debate between candidates for Mayor..."

As my wife read the article to me, most of which was about the upcoming city elections, I began to understand where she was leading. The 'controversial surgeon' the headline referred to was the eye-doctor-turned-miracle-worker that had set up a practice in town a few years back. This guy had been a very popular optometrist in a town not far from ours before he had gone back to med school to become a surgeon. After he graduated, he came to our town and put in a proposal to the city to start a practice for major eye surgery and vision correction. This guy, Doctor Howard, had all the right certifications, so the city accepted the proposal with no qualms. Recently, however, some investigators for a local news channel had uncovered some "shady dealings" at the practice, and Dr. Howard had come under fire for employing not-yet-approved legal procedures. My wife finished the article, and I can only assume she was looking at me and waiting.

"It had never occurred to me when I first heard those allegations that the unapproved procedures might be able to lessen or even eliminate blindness." Erin said to me, and I had been

thinking the very same thing.

“Do you think we should give him a call?”

“How would we find him?” My wife asked. “It said in the article that after the investigations began he had to temporarily close the practice.”

I was about to say something about looking him up on the internet, but my wife spoke first. “Even if we do find him, would you be willing to go through with what is most likely a dangerous and painful procedure that probably won’t even work?”

I had never heard my wife speak so bluntly before. “I’d have to think about it, but whether I plan to go through with it or not, I’d like to speak with this Dr. Howard.”

After the article in the paper that day, there was almost no media coverage of the doctor’s situation. My wife did some investigating of her own over the next week, and eventually discovered a home address and phone number listing for the town where he had originally lived and practiced. I called the next day and spoke with Dr. Howard’s wife, Krista. She was hesitant to tell me anything about her husband’s situation, but she told me that he would be back by dinner time, and if I still wanted to talk to him to call then. I thanked her, and promised I’d call back later.

When I finally called around 7 o’clock that evening, I was so nervous I was almost trembling. My wife and I had just finished dinner, and while she cleaned up and started the dishes, I sat at the table and held the phone.

“What do you think he’ll say?” I had no idea what to expect from this man, and for all I knew he could have already been sued by every medical association that found out what he had been doing.

I heard Erin put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher, click the cover shut and turn the dial to some setting or another. She walked over to where I was sitting and put her hand on my shoulder. “I really don’t know, Chris, but I’m sure he’ll be very understanding, and we may even be able to set up an appointment for when he comes back into town to start up his practice again.”

“You mean if he comes back into town to start up his practice again,” I corrected her. “With the fall-off in coverage of his story lately, I think they may have wrapped him up and shipped him home for good.”

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, hon.”

I dialed the numbers on the cordless phone as my wife read them to me, and after three rings I heard a man’s voice on the other end.

“Hello?” It was a deep voice, but it also sounded like an older man’s voice. A man in his fifties or sixties, I guessed.

“Hi, is this Doctor Howard?”

“It is.”

“Ah, yes, hi. My name is Chris Tomlinson and I was calling about the eye surgery practice you used to run here in Price Hill.”

“What about it?”

“Well, you see, I’m blind, and I heard...”

“I’m sorry sir, but there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing I can do for you. My office was shut down last week and I was lucky the AMA didn’t litigate. Besides, the operations I performed were on people who had only recently lost their sight, not people blind from birth.”

“Oh, but you see, I only went blind about 8 months ago, which is why I was calling...”

He paused for a moment, perhaps thinking, but didn’t change his mind. “I’m very sorry sir. There is nothing within the limitations of the law that I can do for you. Goodbye.”

The phone clicked in my ear, and for a split second I was heartbroken. I hurriedly dialed the number again, but in my haste (and lack of sight) I had dialed the wrong number. I handed the phone to my wife, and she handed it back to me after a few moments of soft taps. After several rings, I heard that same deep voice.

"Please doctor, you don't understand, I'm a writer, I write poetry and stories and novels about all the beautiful things that I used to be able to see, you have no idea how debilitating this has been to my career!"

More silence followed, and I once again had hope. After a few seconds though, I still only heard silence, and I thought he had hung up. Suddenly: "How long did you say you've been blind?"

"About eight months, doctor." I was trying to contain my excitement, but obviously I had failed miserably.

"Don't get your hopes up, Mr. Tomlinson, but I will consider what you have asked. I would like to meet with you some time this month, but I need to meet you here at my home in Amberly, if you don't mind."

I eagerly agreed, and after he gave me directions to his house and set a date, I hung up the phone and gave my wife a tearful hug.

Erin and I met with Dr. Howard about a week and a half later. It was over a two-hour drive to get to his home in the neighboring town of Amberly, but we both felt it was worth it. When we finally neared his house, though, Erin mentioned to me that we weren't in the ritzy, upper-class part of town like she had expected, but rather a neighborhood that looked very much like the one she and I lived in. All the houses looked about the same, she said—pretty small—and when we pulled up to the address written on the slip of paper, it was a modest brick ranch with two very economic-looking cars in the driveway.

Erin got out of the drivers seat and helped me up the short walkway to their door. A woman that I assumed was Mrs. Howard opened the door and invited us to come sit in the living room. She introduced herself as Krista Howard, Doctor Howard's wife, and asked us if we wanted anything to drink. We both declined, but she brought us waters anyway. When Doctor Howard finally came in, I stood up and introduced myself and my wife, and held out my hand.

"Where's your dog?" Doctor Howard asked as he shook my hand. I explained that we left our dogs at home, and wondered to myself why he would ask such a question.

"No no, I meant where's your seeing-eye dog?"

I must have turned beet red, and quietly told him that we had decided against getting one. Doctor Howard chuckled, and invited me to sit down again.

"Against my better judgment," he began, "I have invited you here to listen to your offer. Something about it interests me."

"Offer?" Erin asked. "We assumed you had set prices on your operations. We're willing to pay whatever that price may be."

"No offense, but you two have obviously never read anything about the way my procedures worked, did you?"

Both Erin and I admitted that we did not in fact know much about these procedures.

"Well, he explained, here's how it worked: every procedure that I did on blind people while my practice was still open took place within a month of the patient's loss of sight."

My stomach turned.

"However," he went on, "We have no records to show that the procedure couldn't still work after an extended period of time." He paused here, as if to let this sink in.

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“Well, I am prepared to make you an interesting, if dangerous, proposal. Since the time when you first called, I have been working on a new form of the old procedure I used to perform on recently blinded patients. If I am correct, this procedure will allow for a longer latency period for the blindness to take effect.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Well, I’m not sure about that yet.” He said. “I haven’t tried it.” I heard him smile. “Would you be interested in being the guinea pig for such an operation?”

“Do I have to tell you now?”

“Oh no, of course not. However, if you are going to agree to such an endeavor, I will need to have enough time to prepare, and I would like to perform this operation as close to a year after the initial loss of sight as possible.”

“How much time will you need?”

“I suspect it will require about two weeks’ preparation.”

“Well, I first went blind the morning of February nineteenth,” I told him. “What’s the date today?”

“It’s October fourth,” Mrs. Howard said.

“So I will need to know no later than February fifth.”

“By then, will you have a better idea of what the risks will be for this procedure?” Erin asked.

“I’ll call you in a month or so and tell you what I think the major risks of the operation are. Until then, I don’t recommend making a decision.”

Erin and I thanked the doctor profusely for his time, and made the long drive home in relative silence.

When Doctor Howard called a month later, he informed us that the risks would probably be no greater than a bit of nausea for a few weeks after the procedure and minor headaches every so often, but there was also the potential for unforeseen complications. After a few minutes’ deliberation Erin and I accepted his offer. When we called to tell him we had accepted, Erin asked how much he would be charging for this operation, but Doctor Howard said that because it was experimental, he should be paying me for the exam. I told him that wouldn’t be necessary, and agreed that it was a fair trade.

Christmas came and went that year, and the only one to get anything exciting were the dogs: some new chew toys and fresh pillow covers for their beds. I was a little sad that I didn’t get to see all the nice decorations Erin had set out this year, but we were both nevertheless very excited about the upcoming operation. January and the first half of February passed very quickly, and here I am now, sitting once again in Doctor Howard’s living room, holding Erin’s hand in mine.

Dr. Howard walks into the room and tells me that he is ready to begin.

“Good luck, honey, I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Erin says to me as Doctor Howard leads me back to his operating room. As it turns out, the operating room is no more than his personal study, quite a spacious one, turned into a small medical facility. Doctor Howard explains to me that he will be feeding me nitrous oxide throughout the procedure, but that I can not, under any circumstances, be put under. He also explains to me exactly what the procedure entails, and all I remember from that explanation were the words “needle” and “eye” used in close proximity far too often.

“First,” he explains, “after you’ve had about ten minutes’ worth of the nitrous, I’ll put one fluid in the side of your left eye, and another in the side of your right.” He said all of this almost cheerfully. I took it as a sign that he was hopeful about its outcome, and not the actual jabbing of multiple syringes

into each eye.

As I lay back on the operating table, I begin to wonder whether or not I should be afraid of the needles. I never have liked them, but since I wouldn't be able to see them piercing the whites of my eyes, I figure that by then it'll be too late to be scared. Doctor Howard turns on the nitrous, and my fingers and toes eventually go numb.

Only a few moments later, Doctor Howard says "Here we go," and I feel something touching the outside of each of my eyes. Then a period of complete darkness. As I open my eyes, I still can't see anything, but then I notice a faint light at the top and bottom of my field of vision, and I feel something being slowly unwrapped from around the top of my head.

Ian Comwell, '07