

## Being Blind

by Mike Radice and Jon Freeman

[3,469 Words]

I had no idea he'd do something horrible. Maybe I could have stopped him. I couldn't see his face, that's why. People tell me the face says it all, and if I could have seen it, I would have known and then could have done something. But all I can see are hazy shapes, and I know when it's light or dark. I depend on others to tell me what things look like, "My nose is big," or "My hair is blonde." I've been blind since birth, so I can't picture it, and I don't really know what those things mean sometimes, but I wish I could have seen this.

I'm curled up in my bed like a snail in its shell, and I'm crying. I need to tell someone to get it off my chest, so I'll tell you. Thanks for listening. I'll try and start at the beginning.

I'm Jason, I'm 11-years-old, and I'm home-schooled by my mom. We live in a rural area 20 miles outside of Toledo, Ohio, and Mom says the schools here can't teach blind children, so she teaches me at home. There are special schools in Toledo, but Dad couldn't afford them, so Mom does it here. She does a pretty good job.

To keep a roof over our heads, Dad worked long and hard hours at two jobs. During the day, he worked at the Hess station on Main Street as a mechanic. He complained a lot about the job, because when Pete didn't show up for work, Dad had to operate the cash register, and he even had to pump gas.

"I'm a trained mechanic, God damn it," he used to say.

He'd bark about customers who stole Fritos and M&Ms from the rack and got mad at the ones who didn't tip him for washing their windows. At night, he worked a a janitor at the

elementary school down the street, the one I would have attended if I could see. He worked there five evenings a week, and I know he hated it too because he never talked about it.

"I also thought he hated me. I was the reason he had to work those miserable jobs."

When I'm not studying with Mom, I'm up in my room at a table by the window, trying to piece together this ridiculous jigsaw puzzle. It distracts me from everything else. I know it's difficult for someone like me, but I try anyway. I can't see the pieces. I just feel the edges until I find the right fit. I often find myself forcing pieces together only to remove them, and then I upset the ones I've already fitted together. It's frustrating, but I'm always determined to finish. I do about one every two weeks. My mother gets them for me from the library.

A few weeks ago, I heard shouting from downstairs and a door slamming. Dad had come home. The noise told me he'd stopped at The Shamrock Bar on the corner. He often stopped there for drinks because I thought he couldn't stand to be around me sober. When he came home like that, I couldn't concentrate on the puzzle, and put on earphones and listen to Justin Bieber's *Believe* or *xx*. Finger-clicking music, and an even better distraction.

But it wasn't just dad that I thought had cheated himself. It was, and still is, Mom Too. She loves me deeply, but even she can't deny I've held her life back. She has a college degree from Miami University and was a high school math teacher before she had me. She wants go to night school to learn computers, but we can't afford it. I know that because I've heard Dad yelling about the \$150 it would cost for the class and the book. I always act like I can't hear their fights because I think Mom would be crushed if she knew I understood what was really going on. But I was crushed too, because I knew that my circumstances were at the core of them.

The night it happened, there was a course of events both routine and odd. My mother provided the routine. While I sat on my bed listening to xx, I smelled hot chocolate, a cue that she was outside my door for her nightly bedtime check-in. I know I'm 11, and I shouldn't be excited about hot chocolate checks, but I am. I also love her whipped cream-topped drink.

I took off my earphones.

Mom knocked. "May I come in?" She'd trained me not to enter their bedroom when the door was closed, and I had done the same.

"Yes," I said.

She sat beside on the bed, handed me the mug, and ran her hand through my hair. She was always messing with my hair, but I didn't mind. I loved the attention.

"Is Dad home yet?"

"Yes.. He wanted to come up and say 'hey' before he went to sleep, but he had a long day."

I sipped my hot chocolate. It burned my tongue, and I got some whipped cream on my upper lip. I licked it off.

"Is your homework finished?"

"Yes. I did it after dinner." I fibbed, but I'd finish after she went downstairs.

Mom got up, and I heard her searching my desk. Then, I heard a "plop" of something solid on my wood desk chair.

"Jason. The book is on your chair."

She knew me and I was caught, but I wasn't going to admit my lie. I'd get it done, and let her think that maybe she was wrong.

I am technically in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and the assignment was to finish John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. It's a story about two migrant workers during the Depression searching the country for work. I was only about half way, but the book was depressing. I felt sorry for them, but I didn't like the book very much, and I wondered if it were true that students at Woodland Elementary School actually read it. I prefer to read about rich people. How bad could their lives be? I'd like to be rich.

After Mom had left, I sat at my desk and started reading the book, moving my fingers as fast as I could across the cells. But after a couple of pages, my head felt tired and it hurt, a signal that it was time to give up and go to bed. Hopefully, I'd read enough. I carefully covered the puzzle with a towel, and then gently placed on top of it *Of Mice and Men*, my cell phone, and a piece of wrapped candy. I did it in a way so that only I know if they're moved. Mom had snuck in here twice before and put sections of the puzzle together when I was out of the room. She thought she was helping me by trying to make me feel that I was doing more than I actually did. She never did a lot of pieces, but I didn't want her to do any, and was afraid to say something because she had good intentions.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of Dad stumbling down the hall toward my room. My door creaked open a notch, which confirmed what I was hoping for; Dad was paying me a visit. He was usually distant and grumbly, but I still loved him and cherished the few tender moments we had together..

In the middle of the night, I awoke to the sound of heavy breathing in my doorway. I smelled whisky, so I knew it was my dad, and for some reason I pretended I was still asleep, not wanting to spoil the moment. He stared at me, I felt it. I wasn't sure if I should say something, so

I stayed under the covers and pretended to be asleep. After a minute or two, I heard broken exhales and the whiskey sloshing around in the bottle. Then the door closed, and I heard his footsteps going down the hall. My heart raced, and I felt alive. I'd hoped he came because he cared about me, and not because he wanted to study the source of all his problems. I wonder if it is both. But it didn't matter. He'd never done that before, and I liked it.

I went back to sleep and woke up with the alarm went off. I felt the clock's face: 6:15 a.m. I pulled the blanket off and worked on my puzzle. Piece by piece, it was coming together. Mom had told me that when it was finished, it would look like a red barn on a farm in Appalachia. But I had no idea what that looked like. But it doesn't matter, because I just enjoyed the challenge. It could be blank for all I cared. Finishing it gave me the feeling that I could -- if I wanted to -- put the whole world together without seeing it. That would be quite an accomplishment.

Putting my family together is another matter. If only there was a way to make everyone happy again. One option that might help would be if I was gone. Then, Dad would only need one job, and Mom could back to teaching. They'd have the money for a new house, vacations, and for some fun. But running away wasn't an option due to my lack of sight. My grandmother would take me in, but Mom would just come and get me. I had also toyed with the idea of ending all the pain around me by ending me, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. It had to be painless.

When I walked downstairs, Mom was making breakfast. The smell of eggs, sausage and toast made my stomach growl. Dad had already left for work, and I could sense that something bothered Mom. She moving sporadically, quickly, and she twice dropped a big metal spoon.

“Something wrong, mom?”

“No sweetie,” she said. “Just want breakfast over so we can get started on your book.”

I had an uneasy feeling about that “No sweetie” response. She’d pushed it out too hard.

After we ate, Mom sat down next to me at the dining room table to give me an oral quiz on what I’d read. I could barely focus. All I could do was imagine my parents’ life without me, and it was wonderful -- bright patches of light, laughter. But then I got a cold chill at the thought of not being with them.

“How far did you get in the book?” Mom asked.

“Pretty far,” I said. I twirled the book on the plastic table cloth.

“*How* far?”

“I’m not sure.” I tilted my head down. Now, I was in for it. I had no excuse except that I was tired, but that never worked.

She slid my “special” computer keyboard across the table toward me. It was the one the public school district had bought for me. I can’t be in a real class in a real school because it doesn’t have the equipment. But Mom had said they were required to help her teach me, and part of that help meant providing equipment. I learned to type on this thing from a tutor sent by the district.

“Now, write an essay of 500 words and think of this: Mr. Steinbeck’s book was criticized by many for its profane language. Of what you’ve read so far, did you find any of it profane?”

“Profane?”

“Something irreverent or disrespectful.”

“Oh,” I said, and I immediately thought of something to do with sex. I learned about it through Boy Scouts. I hadn't read that part of the book, evidently, because I couldn't think of anything "profane."

“And even if you didn't," Mom said, "what did you read that might lead you to believe that people thought it was? And be sure to tell me why you think so. Use an example or two from the book."

That was a lot to think about. My shoulders tensed, my neck hurt. I didn't think I should have to do this because in a day or so I wouldn't be around. I wanted to shout, “No,” but I was caught in the middle of a lie. I began to sweat.

“I'll start when you leave the room,” I said. “I don't want you hovering over me. I can't think when you do that.”

My mind raced. I heard the click-click-click of the egg timer on the table. It vibrated through me like a bomb device.

“You have 30 minutes,” she said, sounding stern. “Oh, and your father is going to be home for dinner, and there is something I want to start in the kitchen so that it'll be ready for tonight.”

“What?” I asked.

“Death by Chocolate,” she said. “You'll love it. It's full of sugar and fat. By the time I'm finished making the brownie layers, you should be finished. Then, you can take a 15-minute break and we'll move onto algebra.” She touched my shoulder and left for the kitchen.

I liked knowing that I would be able to share a good meal with Dad before I left. I felt an incredible relief, as if I wanted everything about tonight to make up for the 15 years of pain and suffering I brought to my parents.

The timer went off. I jumped. I wasn't finished, but it would be good enough. I stopped in the kitchen and told Mom I was going upstairs for my break. She was the brownies-to-be in the oven. She said she'd call me for algebra when it was time.

When I got to my room, I removed the items on top of the blanket hiding the puzzle. I wanted to finish it before I left, and would get at least a few more pieces in place while on break. I had 27 pieces left. If I have too, I'd stay up all night.

That night, dinner was awkward with Dad asking questions about how well my studies were going and what music I liked. He'd never seemed to care before. He even congratulated me on my essay: "Your mother said it was very good," which I was sure was a lie, because she said to finish the book and we'd try again. I couldn't shake the feeling that he was excited about something. He never got excited. He sounded sober, and I didn't smell booze on his breath. Maybe he bought a lottery ticket and won. He bought them every day. He sounded happy and I was glad, because I wanted my last memory of him to be like this.

After dinner, I went up to my room to work on the puzzle. I had eight pieces to go. There was a knock on my door. It was Dad.

"Come in," I said. He'd been trained to knock, too.

"Hey, buddy," Dad said. "Just wanted to see what you're up to. That puzzle. You do that all by yourself?"



Dad never brought up the fact I was blind. I'd never been quite sure if it was because he was uncomfortable with it, or because he didn't want to offend me. I'd have liked it if he brought it up. I'd love to discuss it with him, or any other topic, for that matter. I simply shrugged my shoulders.

"Yeah, Dad. It's just a little something I do to pass the time."

"No, it isn't, Jason. You've accomplished something I've never been able to do. You're a remarkable kid. I know that I haven't always been there for you, but I'm going to see that you get everything you need from now on."

"I know you work hard, and I'm okay, really. I have everything I need." Was he going to take on a third job? He'd really resent me for that, and then he might drink more, and get even angrier about things. I preferred things no worse than they already were.

This new, softer dad made me tingle with love for him. He sounded sincere. He never talked to me like that. Suddenly, I feel sorry for him. Dad put his hand on my shoulder. He had a warm touch, and his hand was hard, like a big piece of clay.

"I just wanted to come up here and let you know that I love you, buddy. Oh, and we're going to get you a special tutor to come out here more often. A private one."

My pulse raced. "We can't afford it, Dad," I insisted.

"You leave that up to me."

Dad reached around and gave me a hug from behind. I couldn't remember the last time he'd hugged me, let alone touched me, and he smelled like soap instead of booze. I rested my head on his shoulder, tears rolled down my face. He let me stay like that for awhile. It was what

I'd always wanted from him. What I'd always dreamed about. Maybe he really did care about me, but why the change? It felt good but impermanent, almost as if he was saying "goodbye."

After he let go, he walked out the door without saying a word, closed it softly behind him. I had no idea what caused him to do this. He told me he loved me twice per year, at Christmas and on my birthday. What just happened changed everything. Now, I can't leave. This feeling had to last.

I woke up in the middle of the night with my face in my puzzle, and heard voices coming from downstairs. There was a puzzle piece in my hand and one on my forehead. I set them down in the far corner of the table where I stored the ones waiting to be put into place -- just three left. I felt my clock – it's 4:32, and way too early for anyone to be awake. I walked out of my room and went downstairs. On the way, I heard male voices but none that matched Dad's. I also heard Mom crying, which sent chills through my body. I picked up the pace, holding onto the railing and heading for the kitchen, where the voices were.

"Oh, sweetie," Mom said with a muffled voice when I entered the kitchen. "What are you doing awake?"

She sniffed. I sensed two other people in the room. I grabbed the back of a kitchen table chair and squeezed.

"What's going on? Where's Dad?" I asked. There was a long pause before I heard a male voice I didn't recognize.

"Ma'am," the voice said. "You need to talk to your son. We'll be outside."

I heard footsteps, and then the front door opened and closed. There was a long pause after that, and I heard Mom trying to control her breathing so she could speak. I waited, but I couldn't wait.

"Jason. Please sit," she said.

But I couldn't sit.

"Your father. Your father." She touched my arm. Her fingers were cold. "He isn't with us anymore."

"He left?" He couldn't have left after what he did last night. I wanted more of that.

"Your father has died." She burst into tears.

I knocked the wood chair over. "What do you mean?"

A rush of emotions filled me: anger, frustration, fear. I couldn't understand any of it. Tears streamed down my face. My breath quickened.

"What happened? Did somebody kill him?"

"He died in a car accident. His car went off the side of the road and it hit a tree. The police said he died peacefully." She squeezed his arm. He shook-off her hand.

"Where?"

"Basset Rd."

"He went over the cliff?"

She didn't say anything. Bassett Road was a winding street hugging the side of a cliff for several miles. Maybe he was drunk and missed a turn. But at this hour? He didn't leave for work until seven a.m., and his route didn't include Bassett.

"What was he doing out so late?" I asked. He killed himself, I'm sure of it. But why? Then it dawned on me: insurance money.

A couple of nights ago, I overheard them fighting over money, nothing new. Mom had asked Dad to stop paying into his stupid life insurance policy because they couldn't afford it, and he nobody was dying anytime soon. The next day at breakfast, when I asked what life insurance was, Dad explained it to me. And now this. That's where the money was coming from my tutor: He killed himself for the money. He did it for me. I thought he hated me, when all along, he gave his life for me.

Then, I couldn't leave.