

The Accident

By Jameel Anne Johnson

The Blind Spot

I'd been wearing contact lenses for over 15 years when this happened. When I first started wearing contacts in my teens, you had to take them out every night to clean them regularly. I was way too irresponsible for that. Then they made the kind you could leave in for several days at a time. Apparently, I was too lazy to follow that procedure as well. As my optometrist told me a few years before, I developed a small eye infection from keeping those lenses in too long. Finally, the industry got smart and created the disposable kind. Usually after eight hours or so, the lenses felt so sticky and uncomfortable, I had to take them out. So as procedure dictates, I had scheduled my annual eye exam so I could get my contact lens prescription updated and receive a new batch of disposable contact lenses.

I was living in the Midwest at the time, and I went to my local LensCrafters which had an optometrist's office set up right next door, so I went through the process of a standard eye exam. The visual field test was new for me. I can't remember if I had taken one

before then, but the machine they sat me in front of was something I hadn't seen before. A large white circle with a black dot in the center. The woman in the office told me to place my chin here, push my forehead there, and stare straight ahead. Then she placed a device in my hand. "Stare at the black dot and click the button if you see any lights appear." Interesting little game.

After testing both my eyes, the optometrist came in and said he had found some unusual results. I had a blind spot.

"Can you see it?" he asked.

"No," I responded, "I see just fine."

"Well, we ran the test twice in both eyes, and you definitely are missing vision in this quadrant." He referred to a screen showing the results of the test. Two large grey circles with vertical and horizontal lines intersecting them were on the screen representing both of my eyes. Two blurry, dark smudges appeared in each circle.

The doctor explained, pointing to one of the smudges, "This is normal, but this other one..." pointing to the gray spot in the lower right quadrant of the image, "...is not. And what concerns me more," he went on, "is that it appears in the same place in both eyes." He sat back, clicking on the mouse of his computer. The printer started to hum, printing the results of the test. "This tells me

it is not your eyes with the problem. The problem is in the brain. I would like you to see a neuro-ophthalmologist.”

Now, being in my early-30s at the time, I would like to remember myself as being mature enough to respond to this news appropriately. Twenty years later, telling this story, I would think hearing this news, I should have been a bit upset, or at least concerned. But all I can remember is being annoyed. Annoyed I had been there longer than I planned. Annoyed I had to take off work to see another doctor. Annoyed I may not get my contact lenses. In fact, I think my first question was, “Will I still be able to get my contact lenses?”

I have learned a bit about myself since then and know that I’m not the kind of person that takes my health issues too seriously. This is the opposite of how I was raised. My mother did not hesitate to take me or my sister to the emergency room for any ailments that arose. Looking back, that was an excellent trait for a single mother to have. But in my youth, I did not see the benefit.

I remember sitting for hours in that boring ER waiting to have my ankle x-rayed to make sure my sprain wasn’t more serious. It wasn’t. One time we went to the ER because something flew into my eye. The nurse flushed my eye with saline and whatever was causing the

irritation came out. No one knows what it was. My sister fainted once. After my mom revived her, she said we should all go to the emergency room together. She was 14, I was 15, and I begged my Mom to let me stay home alone.

“She fainted, but now she’s awake,” I argued. “Why do we all have to go to the ER?”

“This could be a serious medical condition,” my mother declared. “You should be concerned about your sister and want to find out what’s happening!” After hours of waiting, they determined there was nothing wrong with my sister and the fainting spell was probably due to teenage hormones.

I think these experiences, and others, led me to not take medical issues too seriously. It’s not a matter of denial. It just seems like most medical issues turn out to be not that serious, so why get worked up? However, I am mature enough to follow up on advice. I made the appointment to see the Neuro-Ophthalmologist.

Thinking back on what happened in the ophthalmologist’s office from this point forward seems odd to me. This all happened in the late 1990s before the internet was very popular. Otherwise, I may have Googled around for a second opinion. I was told the woman I

was seeing was one of the top neuro-ophthalmologists in the state, so I approached everything with a cautious, but open mind.

She ran another field vision test. Same results. I have a blind spot in the lower right quadrant (although I don't see it). She was also very interested in the size of my eyes. "One of your eyes is smaller than the other, which is very common," she said. However, when measuring something inside my eye, it was smaller than the other in the same proportion. She said this was very unusual and was an indication half my face was shrinking. I looked at the doctor, disbelieving. "Half my face is shrinking?" I repeated.

She said I could have a rare disease. I don't remember what disease this was. A quick internet search tells me she may have told me it could have been Bell's Palsy or Parry-Romberg syndrome, but I honestly don't remember. I do remember she said the only way she could test to see if I had this disease was to put cocaine in my eyes. She had to put cocaine in my eyes to test to see if I had a disease causing half my face to shrink. I remember laughing. I just could not take this situation seriously. And I was NOT going to let her put cocaine in my eyes. She was disappointed, but I assume she eventually got over it.

She said the next step for following up on the blind spot was for me get an MRI. So, I had to take another day off of work to come in for the MRI and then again, several days later, to discuss the results of the MRI test.

“Have you ever had a heart attack or a stroke?” the doctor asked me.

I looked at the doctor surprisingly, “No.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Have you been in any serious accidents?” she pointed to the scar on my chin and then tapped her own chin in reference.

“Oh, yeah, when I was a baby. My family was in a car accident, and I was cut by the glass.”

“How old were you?” she asked.

“Seven months,” I answered.

“Well, according to these results, you’re showing signs you may have had more significant brain trauma at the time. Which could explain the blind spot and that you possibly experienced temporary paralysis on one side of your face,” she explained. “If it happened when you were that young, you may have compensated for it as you matured which explains why you’re not able to see the blind spot

today. You may want to talk to someone to get more information about what you went through at that time.” I guess these results helped her drop the issue of me having a rare disease.

I have a few scars on my body I was told was from a car accident that took place in April of 1968, when I was seven months old. I have a long scar across my chin, one on my temple that goes back into my hair line, and one very straight scar that goes across my left ankle. They’ve never really bothered me, and I’ve never been self-conscious about them. The accident took place when my parents were still married and we all lived in Los Angeles, California. My mother was driving, pregnant with my sister, and my father was in the passenger seat. This was before car seats were required for infants and my father was holding me on his lap. My mother had explained an on-coming driver swerved out of their lane and hit our car head on. That driver, deemed intoxicated, died at the scene. The three of us survived but had several injuries from which we all eventually healed (the physical ones, anyway). My sister was born six months later with no complications. These were all the details that were ever explained to me, and I had always accepted them as the full story.

My parents divorced when I was five years old, and my mother moved us back to her hometown in Illinois the summer before I

turned seven. I called my mother that evening to ask her about the car accident. How injured was I? Could I have gone into cardiac arrest as a baby or had a stroke?

“Oh Lord. I don’t remember,” Mom said. “Call your father. He’ll know all the details.”

I called my father. “Didn’t Lucille tell you what happened?”

“Mom said you’d remember the details,” I responded, and, sure enough, he remembered many details. “I was wondering when I’d have to tell you about this,” he said.

Learning to Live It

“How did I get myself caught up in this?” Lucille asked herself, “again.” As she quickly folded up her daughter’s favorite blanket and grabbed the light blue tote she used as a make-shift diaper bag. She remembered she left the baby’s larger bag in her car.

She could hear her husband slamming kitchen cabinet doors, “It’s not here, Lou! Where is it?” He was looking for his favorite coffee mug, and she could tell his aggravation level was getting high.

“I told you, second shelf with the rest of them,” she walked into the kitchen, daughter on one hip, slipping the strap of the tote over

her shoulder. He was opening every cabinet door except the one she had directed him to. She could see he had a medicine bottle held tightly in his right fist, while he was removing cans of vegetables out of another cabinet.

She walked over to the cabinet to the right of the kitchen window, where they kept all their drinking glasses and coffee mugs. She opened the cabinet and brought out the one he was looking for. Holding it quietly in her hand, she watched her husband continually remove can after can out of the cabinet on the other side of the kitchen. “Louis,” she said, her tone soft but clearly annoyed.

He didn’t seem to hear her, reaching for a can in the back. “Why do we have black beans? I hate black beans. Toni never makes anything with black beans. You buy this stuff just to bother me, don’t you?” The baby looked at her father, then back at her mother with an expression, Lucille thought, of unusual maturity for a seven-month-old. It’s time to take Louis to see Toni, Lucille thought. His sister was always able to calm him down.

Lucille waited, and eventually her husband looked up, seeing his wife standing patiently holding his young daughter, and the elusive mug. He walked over, grabbed the mug and quickly held it under the kitchen faucet for water. “Thanks babe.”

He had the medicine bottle open with a snap and upturned to his mouth, downing she didn't know how many pills. "Louis, not so many..." she said.

He ignored her. "Did you call Toni? We should go see Toni."

"C'mon Louis. We're going now," she said. Heading out the front door. She walked towards the driveway, where their two vehicles were parked.

She could hear Louis behind her locking the front door. "Give me the baby," he said, "You drive." She headed for her husband's Lincoln, but then remembered all the baby's gear was in her Chevy. As she turned towards the smaller car, Louis followed, reaching for his daughter, smiling as he held her up. Whatever kind of pills those were, Lucille thought, they worked quickly.

Dr. Antonia Clarke had a private practice not too far from her brother's home. As a general practitioner, she was their family doctor. As the family of three entered the waiting room, Louis walked right up to the glass window where the receptionist sat. She smiled warmly, "Hi Mr. Webb. How are you?"

"Hey, Wanda," Louis smiled back. "Is Toni free?"

“She’s with a patient,” she grinned back, wagging her pen between her fingers.

Louis walked over to the door leading to the back offices, testing the doorknob that wouldn’t budge. “Wanda, buzz me in, huh?”

“Sorry, Mr. Webb,” Wanda responded. “She said I can’t do that anymore. You have to wait.”

Louis looked around the room, as if he was looking for another way to get to the examination rooms. He needed to see his sister. “C’mon Louis, just sit down,” Lucille said as she moved over to one of the waiting chairs, holding her daughter on her lap. She reached into the diaper bag and pulled out a bottle, shaking it vigorously.

Right then, Dr. Clarke poked her head out into the receptionist’s office area spying her brother pacing nervously. “Eddie, do not move from that spot! I will see you as soon as I can!”

“Toni, just real quick!” Louis jumped up.

“Eddie, do not move!” and she disappeared. Toni was the only one that could get away with calling Louis, by his middle name. Louis Edward wasn’t fond of the nickname, but rarely deprived his favorite sister of anything.

Louis looked at his wife, “If you would have gotten me here sooner, I’d be in there by now.” He held out his finger for his daughter to grab. The baby closed her fingers around it happily. Lucille sat quietly, knowing anything she said would just make the situation worse.

I have to try to stick this out, she thought. She thought about having to explain this to her parents, again. Another marriage ending. No, she thought. That was not an option. They would never understand. What would they tell people? She was on the cover of the *East St. Louis Monitor* for God’s sake! Everyone in town would be talking.

Louis stood up and started pacing the room. What was he always so anxious about, Lucille thought? She did not sign up for this. There was no explanation. No reason! When they were dating, he was so together, so charming. She never saw any of this. But then again, they only dated for four months. I don’t deserve this, Lucille thought. I did nothing to deserve this! She frustratingly crossed her legs, shifting her baby in her arms.

“Come in, Eddie,” Toni opened the entryway to the examination rooms. Louis went through, shutting the door quickly behind them.

Lucille felt a tiny flutter in her lower belly and took a deep breath. She was already feeling the new baby. Two babies! They'll be 13 months apart. She's going to have to make this work. Her kids will need their father, and he clearly adores his first child. Toni will be able to help. She was always able to calm him down when he got worked up. She didn't know what caused it. Maybe something at work? Who knows? This is ridiculous. How did I get myself into another ridiculous situation?

Louis was so handsome and tall. She loved tall men. His whole family seems smart and accomplished. All his friends, successful and well-dressed. Back in Illinois you would never meet so many smart, well-spoken, colored people. Lucille had come to California for the teaching position she was recruited for. But she knew the truth. She had come to California to find a husband. She didn't want any of those country boys flocking all around her back in Illinois. Country turkeys, she thought. She deserved better. She came to the big city to meet a man who wore a business suit and carried a briefcase. When she met Louis, he checked all the boxes. She thought she had caught The One. This should have worked, Lucille thought with frustration. Why is this turning out so, so...illogical!

The door slammed open and Louis came stomping out, “Let’s go!” he shouted, as he stormed out of the office. Lucille rushed to gather up her supplies. Toni came out into the waiting room, reaching for a plastic rattle her niece dropped on the floor.

Handing the rattle to her sister-in-law, Toni said, “He’s going to be upset for a little while, but he should calm down soon. Give him a nice glass of scotch, and he’ll be fine.”

“What’s he so upset about?” Lucille asked.

“Oh, I can’t renew his prescription for another week,” she said dismissively, “and he knows that. He knew that before he came over here. He thinks he can sweet talk me into anything.”

Toni led Lucille out the door, “He’ll be fine. You focus on taking care of that niece of mine,” she rubbed the baby’s head affectionately.

As Lucille headed out, she turned to look Toni in the eyes, shifting the baby higher up on her shoulder. “Toni, I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

Toni stilled and returned Lucille’s intense gaze, “Well, you know Lucille, he’s crazy. You knew that when you married him, didn’t you?”

Lucille stared at Toni, blinking, not knowing what to say.

Toni looked at her new sister, giving her an expression of compassion but then shrugged her shoulders. “This is what you signed up for. Now you have to learn to live it.” Toni turned away, walking back into her office.

“Get in the car,” Louis stated looking furious and impatient. He immediately took his daughter out of his wife’s hands and passed her the car keys in return. As they got in the car, Louis asked, “Did you pick up my suit from the cleaners?”

“No, we can stop now to get it,” Lucille said, as she pulled out of the parking lot on to the main boulevard.

“No, just forget it. I’ll wear the gray one.” Louis waved a rattle in his daughter’s face, “When do you get your next paycheck?”

“Friday, Louis. It’s always on Fridays,” Lucille said.

“You have a tone. What’s with the tone,” he said.

“I don’t have a tone Louis, but this week’s check is going all for bills. No discussion,” she said.

“You really shouldn’t have a tone in front of the baby, Lou,” Louis said.

“Are you kidding?” Lucille looked at him, and then back at the road.

“This is how you’re talking to me?” Louis said. “This is how you talk to your husband?”

“Don’t start, Louis,” Lucille looked at him again, “I’m not going to have this discussion...”

“Look out!” Louis screamed. Lucille looked back at the road and red pickup truck was in her lane coming straight for them.

1964 Chevy Corvair

Reggie knew the crash was coming as soon as he heard the squeal of the tires. He had been retired for four years, but he was in the business for 40 years before that. He knows when he hears a crash, and he knew this one would not be good.

He arose from the couch, hitting the dial to turn down the volume on the black and white television. As he walked to the large picture window in his front room, he could still see the two vehicles slowly settling from the impact they just endured. A bright red Ford F-100 and a...”Oh, geez,” Reggie said out loud. “A Corvair? Whoever’s in that Corvair is dead.”

Reggie worked for Tommy’s shop for 10 years until he took it over in 1934. He ran it successfully for thirty years after that, selling it to

his nephew in 1964. The same year they made the Chevy he was looking at right now. A 1964 Chevy Corvair. The rear-mounted engine was the stupidest idea Chevy ever came up with, especially when there were crashes like this. The trunk was in the front. Head-on collisions meant there was nothing to stop the driver from getting crushed. And that was what he was looking at, a crushed Corvair.

Reggie jerked open his front door, running down the steps. He saw old-lady Wilkins coming out her door as well in her signature melon-colored bath robe. “Oh my! Praise Jesus! Praise Jesus!” she declared. “Joey!” She yelled back into her house. “Call an ambulance!”

Reggie ran to the closer pick-up truck, seeing a young kid with blond hair leaning over the steering wheel. He touched his shoulder and pushed him back to see his face. Dead. This kid was dead.

Then he went to the Corvair, looking at the couple in the front seats. By then, another man Reggie didn't know came down and looked in the opposite car window with him. A colored couple both laid back on the headrests, bodies crushed by the front of the vehicle, the woman's face was covered with blood. Neither were moving.

“Looks like everyone is dead,” the man said.

Reggie looked over at the impacted dashboard and saw movement. What was that? “Jesus!” he said reaching for the moving object. “It’s a baby!” He picked up the baby who had blood all over its head. Holding the baby’s bleeding head carefully, it was moving and whimpering softly. He saw curly black hair, chubby little legs, and a lot of blood.

Another woman, Muriel, appeared at his side. He recognized her as his other neighbor, Larry’s wife. “Oh, Reggie!” she said, “Is that a baby?” They looked at the child together, blood running through Reggie’s fingers dripping on to the sidewalk. “It’s a little negro child,” she said. “You need to take it to a hospital.”

“Yeah,” Reggie said, looking towards his car in his driveway.

“Here,” Muriel was wearing a light sweater and took it off to wrap around the baby, swaddling the infant as well as she could. Reggie was patting his pants pockets to see if he had his car keys, finding them in his front right pocket. “Hurry, Reggie.” Muriel said, handing the baby carefully back to him. “Take it to a hospital.”

Reggie jumped into his ‘67 Mustang, holding the baby to his chest, and took off for California Hospital. He found the emergency entrance and ran in with the child while the sweater the baby was

wrapped in was turning red with blood. “This baby is bleeding!” he yelled at anyone who would listen.

A nurse came over immediately, carefully peeling back the sweater to look at the child. “This is a colored child,” the nurse said, looking up at Reggie.

Reggie blinked at the woman, who had darker skin than the baby he held. “So? What’s the difference? So are you!”

“I know what I am,” the nurse said incredulously. “Are you this child’s father, or legal guardian?”

“No,” Reggie said. “What does that matter?”

“It matters,” the nurse said holding her hands up. “We cannot touch this baby unless we have the parent’s permission, or a police officer tells us to do it.”

“The parents are dead!” he exclaimed. “Well, I think they are,” he mumbled.

The nurse looked at him with a questioning expression. “I’m sorry, sir. You have to take this baby to whomever has the right to tell us what to do with it. That’s the law. You should have let the police bring it in.”

Reggie scooped up the baby, ran out the hospital doorway and jumped into his car to try a different hospital. Maybe Good Samaritan Hospital will take it, he thought.

Where's the Baby?

Wanda was standing looking out the front window of the medical office where she worked. Dr. Clarke came out with a chart in her hands, "What are you looking at, Wanda?"

"There are all these fire trucks and ambulances down the street, so I figure there must be a fire somewhere," Wanda said.

Mrs. Jackson walked in just as Wanda was speaking. She was scheduled for 3PM and was ten minutes late. "Oh, that's no fire. It's some big car accident. That's why I'm late. Traffic is a mess."

"Okay, Mrs. Jackson, let me get you checked in," Wanda said, moving back to her desk behind the glass.

Toni Clarke stood at the window, looking out the glass at the flashing lights and the number of vehicles piling up just two blocks down from her practice. Something is not right, she thought. Something is just not right. She moved towards the door out into the parking lot of her practice. She vaguely heard Wanda calling her

name. She started a fast walk towards the activity down the street. As she got closer, she started to run. She saw the broken debris in the road, and then she saw the vehicles. A bright red truck she didn't recognize, and then an older white Chevy her sister-in-law always drove. "Oh my God!" she cried, running up to the vehicle. A police officer reached out to keep her from getting too close. She saw a fireman working with some big machine she didn't recognize, trying to cut open the vehicle. She saw her sister-in-law being laid gently on a gurney. She was conscious! She was talking, rapidly, not making sense. She was clearly in shock.

"Where's the baby?" Toni cried.

"What baby?" a fireman turned and looked at her.

"There should be a baby in the car!" Toni exclaimed.

"There is no baby, ma'am," the fireman stated.

A woman appeared by Toni's side. "Reggie took the baby," the woman stated.

"What?" Toni turned to the woman, shocked. "Took the baby where?"

“To a hospital,” she said. “He thought they were dead,” she motioned to the man and woman in the white vehicle. “So he took the baby to the hospital since it was bleeding so much.”

Toni didn't wait to hear the end of the woman's sentence. She started running back to her office. She had to get her keys and get to her car. She had to find which hospital her niece was in. She knew hospital policy. She worked in them for years. They would not touch the baby without authorization from a legal guardian or a police officer. Even if the baby was bleeding to death, they would not touch it. And if some random man brought the baby in without the police... Toni couldn't think; she had to hurry.

She rushed into her practice, grabbed her purse, and rushed back out again, running past Wanda and waiting patients with no explanation. She had to find that baby! Eddie had a daughter! She couldn't let anything happen to her brother's daughter. Toni thought about their father. Papa didn't approve of us having boys, but he was okay with girls. He didn't believe the problem was passed down through the girls. Papa felt like females had more of a chance. It didn't make any sense. They all knew their father was taught the old belief. Toni shook her head as she drove. Crazy old superstitions she thought. But many of her brothers believed it, too. Louis felt his

daughter was the blessing he had been waiting for. He couldn't lose her. She had to help her brother by saving his daughter!

I'll try Mount Sinai first, she thought, but after a quick run into the Emergency Room they had no evidence of receiving a colored infant child. And the woman at the front desk explained they couldn't do anything anyway without the parent's consent. Toni ran out of the hospital before the woman could finish her lecture. "I'll try Good Samaritan," Toni thought.

She parked illegally in the drop-off area with the ambulances. Running into the Emergency Room, she saw a cluster of people standing around a small table, the ones usually reserved for infants. She pushed towards them and saw her niece, shaking violently. She was in respiratory failure. She was going into cardiac arrest. She looked down and saw the IV in the child's ankle. Someone was attempting a peripheral catheter. She was in too much trauma for that! Don't they know better? She pulled the IV out of her ankle and started CPR. "Get me a defibrillator, stat!" she yelled.

"Who are you, lady?" someone in dirty scrubs asked her.

"I am Dr. Antonia Clarke and this is my niece, her legal guardian. Get me a defibrillator now, or I'll make sure you never practice medicine again!"

Saving the Leg

Dr. Eugene Hickman had just come off of a 20-hour shift. Luckily it included a couple of well-needed power naps on the surprisingly comfortable couch in the breakroom. Although his background and specialty was in radiology, Gene was doing his rounds working in various fields of medicine at Kaiser Permanente Memorial. For the last two months, they had him working as the primary physician in the Emergency Room.

It had been a moderately busy afternoon. He was thinking of two, supposedly unrelated, cases of severe upper respiratory trauma that had come in, in one day. Quite unusual, he thought. As Gene put on his jacket and picked up his medical bag, he made a mental note to check the test results on those cases to see if any the pathogens showed similarities.

Only one woman with severe abdominal pain refused to let him exam her. Gene was glad those situations were becoming fewer and fewer. Even though Los Angeles was extremely diverse, compared to his hometown of Alton, Illinois, it was still difficult for some white patients to allow a colored doctor to treat them. These were thoughts on his mind as Gene was walking down the main hallway to exit the ER. As he passed the staff nurses, he waved goodbye to

them all, singling one out because she was of significant help with a gun-shot victim who had come in last night. “Good job last night, Karen. Be sure to get some sleep.”

“Have a good evening, Dr. Hickman,” Karen returned.

The ER doors crashed open as the paramedics wheeled in a woman who was the victim of a car accident. Gene could hear his replacement, Dr. Fleming and the paramedics discussing the condition of the woman and what outcomes may take place. “Disarticulation of the left leg is most likely...” “She’s saying she’s pregnant...” He was three feet from the exit door when he heard his name. “Dr. Hickman!” someone called.

He sighed before turning around, knowing he couldn’t be so lucky to get a break. He walked over to the woman on the gurney, taking a visual assessment of the situation. The woman’s face was covered with a bloody gauze and glass chips. He saw her left leg resembled hamburger meat mixed with broken glass. “Do you mind?” he glanced up at Dr. Fleming.

“Be my guest,” Dr. Fleming said.

Dr. Hickman bent over the woman and brushed the broken glass out of her face. He looked up at Dr. Fleming, “This is a young woman,” he said with mild surprise. He took in a deep breath, “Let’s

see if we can save that leg.” He dropped his bag and pointed to a room where they wheeled the woman. “Get me a bucket of water and complete package of surgical tweezers.” Gene decided he was going to get every piece of broken glass out of that leg.

Afterwards

In the late 1960s, the amount and type of health insurance you had determined what hospital to send injured patients. Lucille had just signed on as a teacher in the Los Angeles Public School District. Her medical insurance went into effect right away which meant she was admitted to Kaiser Permanente Memorial. However, she had to wait until Open Enrollment to add her husband and young daughter to her health insurance plan. As uninsured patients, Louis and the baby went to the Good Samaritan Hospital about four miles away.

With her aunt’s help, the baby recovered beautifully. She will live her life with a few scars, but otherwise healthy. They had to tie the infant’s hands down to keep her from scratching at the sutures on her face and head. She also had a bandage on her ankle where they had sliced an opening for the peripheral catheter. Although she frequently screamed in frustration, she was healing quite nicely.

Louis was in a coma for a month and suffered contusions on several internal organs. His left foot was also crushed in the accident and needed reconstructive surgery. Because he had severe blunt trauma to his chest cavity, an exploratory laparotomy was performed to identify organ or vascular injuries. Even after waking from the coma, he came down with an unexplained fever and the doctors had a difficult time determining the source of the infection. During this time, it was decided he should be quarantined until it was better understood what was causing various symptoms.

Louis did seem to feel better after seeing his daughter. So, every day they would hold the infant up to the glass so he could see she was healing and doing nicely. Seeing his daughter raised his spirits and gave him hope. His fever eventually reduced, and he started to heal well enough to end the quarantine. Eventually he and his daughter could visit his wife at the other hospital.

Lucille's injuries included a broken right hip bone, severe damage to both legs (she lost the patella in her left leg), and the laceration of her left nostril. This was later sewn back on, with no significant visual impact.

Their biggest concern was her unborn baby. The technology of ultrasounds was not common even in larger hospitals at this time.

And, as true today, high doses of radiation eliminated the ability to x-ray any pregnant woman. The only way to tell if Lucille's baby was alive was through movement, and with only three months into her pregnancy, there wasn't enough movement to ensure life. The doctors were also concerned about Lucille's ability to give birth to a child. She was going through a significant amount of physical trauma. Could she carry a baby to term? The doctors recommended a dilation and curettage (D&C) procedure to end the pregnancy. "Absolutely not!" Lucille declared. "My baby is fine."

They decided to keep Lucille in Kaiser Memorial until her second baby was born. Her right leg was positioned into skeletal traction to immobilize her pelvic bones, and her left leg was in a cast while it healed. Louis and his daughter were eventually discharged from Good Samaritan to recover at home. Since Louis was in a wheelchair, Lucille's mother flew into town from Illinois to help take care of the family. Toni, as the family doctor, checked on everyone frequently making sure they were cared for properly.

In mid-October of 1968, Lucille gave birth to another beautiful, healthy baby girl and was released from the hospital to go home and care for both daughters.

The Good / Bad Label

“Dad, this happened years ago. Why haven’t you told me about this before?” I asked my father. “I didn’t want to upset you,” was his explanation.

My father had explained, right after the accident, although he appeared unconscious, that was not the case. He was aware of what was happening but could not move any part of his body. He saw his wife, the woman he loved, next to him and thought she was dead. He saw me, on the dashboard “bleeding like a stuck pig” – yes, those were his words. And then a man came, reached in the car, and took me away. He could do nothing to save his family. The whole experience, he said, was, understandably, the worst day of his life.

When I first heard this story in my early 30s, I took it as one of the incredible anecdotes of my childhood. I realized this experience was understandably traumatic for my parents, but I was just a baby. I didn’t remember any of it. The story didn’t upset me. However, as I got older, married, had a child, and divorced, reassessing my life and family experiences has caused me to reflect.

Now, years later, I decided to write this story. Because my father died over ten years ago, I asked my mother to clarify some additional

facts which has helped me write more details here. I was surprised to find out she knew a lot more than she had previously let on.

I had never realized how long she was in the hospital, separated from her husband and daughter. What was that like? “I was fine with it,” she said. “Once I knew you were okay, I knew you were being cared for, so I wasn’t too worried about you. Madea came into town and was taking care of you, Toni was checking on everyone, I was getting wonderful care at Kaiser. I focused on having a good attitude so I could give birth to your sister, and that’s what I did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me some of these details before?” I asked. Was it just too traumatic of a situation to think or talk about? Did she think I blamed her? Was she blaming herself? When I asked her about this her answer was, “Oh no! That accident was the best thing that ever happened to this family. Although it was hard at the time,” she went on, “that accident helped me understand I had to leave your father. He was mentally ill. I had married a man who was in the process of having a nervous breakdown. After the accident, his behavior just escalated, which led me to know that leaving him was the right thing.” Can a horrible car accident lead to a “good” thing?

Placing the “good/bad” label on experiences can be a tricky game. How do you define if an experience is good or bad? The death of a

loved one, being the victim of a crime, coming down with an illness, for example, are all “bad” experiences. What if these, agreeably “bad” experiences led to positive experiences in your life? Does that change the label? Over the years, it has been very comforting to think of “bad” experiences as opportunities to grow and gain strength or knowledge to help others avoid a similar negative experience.

I know this can be a difficult concept to grasp if you receive news of an illness, are in an unhappy marriage, or caring for a young child who has been injured. Since any event in your life can lead to outcomes that may be positive or negative, with this understanding, I try to stay away from the “good/bad” label. This can be a difficult habit to develop, but it does get easier and easier with time.

Avoiding the label, eliminates the need to work so hard to have “good” things happen in your life or to avoid “bad” things from happening. This allows me to free my energy to focus on just living. I find my energy is focused more on trust. Trusting that whatever life throws my way – good or bad – I’ll be able to handle it and enjoy the journey.

Mumtaz and Lucille , 27 July 1968
At the hospital, Kaiser Memorial

