

Chapter 1 | The Beginning of My Journey

Passing cars and seeing stars out the window, the cool night air blew in through the open windows as I hurried home. My wife (at the time) and I had some friends that were getting married soon, and we had invited them over for supper. I had not even had time to get the tortilla chips for the recipe we were planning to make. Hopefully, our friends would arrive late; maybe the traffic out of Toronto would slow them down.

I parked at the house and dashed straight into the kitchen. As I put the chicken and potatoes into the oven, my wife asked about the tortilla chips for the snack. Pretending I had not heard the question, I showed her the red wine I'd grabbed on the way home.

Just then, the doorbell rang. "They're here," I said to her. The table was set with plates, utensils, and wine glasses, and everything seemed ready for us to sit down. Our friends, Lizbeth and Tucker, came in and we all approached the table.

As our friends sat down, my wife went to the kitchen to put the final touches on the food, and I poured the wine to keep them occupied. I took a seat and said cheers and we began to drink from our glasses. Although it was only around 200 mL, and not a strong wine, I noticed that I was already starting to slur my words and get very fidgety as if I had been consuming hard liquor. Confused but not wanting to cause a scene, I pointedly ignored this strange behavior.

When we'd finished our wine, I apologized that we were missing the tortilla chips and offered to walk ten minutes to the convenience store to pick some up, but we decided to go after supper.

My wife and I left the table and went to the kitchen to check on the chicken and potatoes. The chicken was looking brown and juicy so we took it out of the oven and placed it on the counter, and the potatoes were perfectly crispy. We served Tucker and Lizbeth, and I was happy to see how well we had done even though I had been rushing to get things done in time.

With supper over, we walked down the road to the convenience store, glancing up at the stars and just talking about our future. We looked at the other nice houses in our neighborhood, seeing how people lived.

On the way back, I was a bit shaky and flimsy. Again, it felt like I had been drinking quite heavily earlier, which was not the case. I wondered what the heck was happening, but again I stayed silent and ignored whatever was going on, proceeding toward our house and admiring the multi-colored leaves of the trees along our gently curving path. Looking at the sky full of stars, the moon shining bright, and no clouds in sight, helped keep my mind off my body's sudden strangeness.

Back at the house, everything was lit up as if someone was home. We enjoyed a few of the beers that I always kept in the fridge in case of company, then made the snack with the tortilla chips, which turned out to be brownish and crunchy. We had a super time just mumbling about nothing of importance. Our friends spent that night at our place since they were in no shape to be

driving—which can happen when you are having a good time and lose count of how much you’ve had to drink.

I woke up to the sun streaming into my window and proceeded to the washroom, still wobbly. I stared at my face in the mirror and splashed it with cold water, thinking my present unsteadiness would soon go away. But then I looked closer at my eyes and could see that my pupils appeared different than normal, that the black circles in the middle of my eyes were colossal, as if I had been drinking heavily.

Walking unsteadily back to my room, I got dressed and informed my wife that something was off with me, that the unsteadiness had not gone away since yesterday. Still not thinking too much of it, we both headed to the kitchen, where empty bottles sat on the floor and dirty plates were piled on the table.

When Tucker showed up in the kitchen, we decided to drive five minutes to get coffee and bagels. Getting there was a little strange. I got into his sporty car and we immediately blasted the radio. As we pulled out of the driveway, my head began to spin, but I would not let anything divert my attention from the task of getting something to eat. Even as my body hair began to stand up and droplets of sweat appeared on my forehead, I kept pretending everything was okay so as not to cause a scene. At the drive-through, we placed our order of coffee, bagels, and donuts. I was eating my donut when Tucker suddenly pumped the brakes, making the filling of my donut squirt onto my shirt. Then just as quickly he pressed the gas, causing my heart to crash inside my chest. My face was red, and my eyes were wide open. Finally, he released the gas pedal, but I could see lights in the rearview mirror. We double-checked and yes, it was a police cruiser. Tucker pulled over to the side and the police officer pulled over behind us and approached our car. She then knocked on the window and Tucker was like, “What’s the problem, officer?” She replied, “You were speeding and swerving; where are you going in such a hurry?” I chimed in, saying that I had to poop and had told him to speed up. She smiled and let us go, saying to drive slowly and be safe.

Back at the house, we passed around the coffee and toasted bagels, not mentioning to my wife or Lizbeth what had just happened. My symptoms had momentarily disappeared from this excitement, but by the time our friends left for home a few hours later, my unsteadiness was back. Thinking about what this could mean gave me goosebumps; however, I tried not to show it.

I went to sleep that night with darkness in the window and woke up six hours later looking at my clock and realizing it was time for work. But the sunlight through the window looked brighter than usual. Again, I felt like I had been heavily drinking all night. I told my wife, and together we decided I would call in to work and tell them I would be out for the day. I then called our family doctor to explain my issue, and he set up an appointment for that afternoon.

Chapter 2 | Doctors Know it All, Right?

We arrived at the doctor's office, and I was given some simple movement tests. I was asked to stand on one leg, which did not happen; I kept losing my balance. I was asked to walk backward, and I somehow managed to accomplish this task, although it took me longer than usual. My doctor sent me straight to a neurologist to dig deeper into what was going on. My hairs stood up and chills came over my body as I entered the neurologist's office. He began by hitting my knee with a rubber hammer to test my reflexes, touching my nose with my eyes closed, and testing my sensation by poking me in different places and having me guess where. I knew something was off when he sent me to the hospital for an MRI of my brain. My heart began to pound rapidly in my chest. The hospital was a few blocks away, and as I approached, I could feel the chills coming again, my heart beating faster and faster the closer I got to the hospital.

I entered the hospital and saw a washroom just inside the doors. Seeing a place that I could be alone, I stepped inside, went to the sink, and turned on the cold water. After splashing my face a few times, I gazed in the mirror and noticed that my face was pale. I turned off the water and dried my face with a paper towel. I looked in the mirror once more, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and left the washroom. The elevator was right beside the bathroom, so I pressed the up button. I tapped my foot patiently as I waited, but I could feel the goosebumps forming. The elevator door opened, and I pressed the button for the second floor.

The elevator door closed, and the ride up felt like slow motion. It seemed to take 10 minutes to reach the second floor, but it must have been 10 seconds at most. The door opened, and I got out and strolled to the MRI department just a few meters ahead. I approached the secretary and informed her I was there for my brain scan. I was told to take a seat and I'd be called shortly. I lay down, my skin turning red, and grabbed a magazine to read, but before I could open it, I heard my name called. I followed the lady to a gray machine that took up about half the room. In the middle of it was a big tunnel with a place to lay down, and the lady told me to get inside. As soon as my head was resting on the pillow, I was pushed all the way inside the tunnel. The machine began to wind up and I could hear a small object circling my head. It was going faster and getting louder each time it went around, and sometimes it would make a knocking sound. My time in the MRI machine lasted for about 20 minutes. When the scan had finished, the sound gradually slowed until the machine was silent. The technician told me to get up and report back to the neurologist for the results. I did as I was told, my hands wet with sweat.

Once I was in front of the neurologist, my heart once again began to pound and crush against my ribs, but it felt like it was beating in slow motion. The neurologist looked at my MRI, pointing to a chart of the human brain hanging on the brown wall to show me that I had a cyst on my brain stem, just below the brain. He said that they do not operate on that site due to the risk involved. I felt frozen at that moment. I was confused and full of questions, but our meeting was over before I had a chance to ask any. It was only after I left, however, that the reality of the inoperable cyst began to sink in.

The only thing the doctor told me that I understood was that a nurse would visit me daily to check for any changes in my condition. I had no idea how to respond; all I could do was get into my car and start to drive. People were honking at me, but I did not hear. All I could think of was what was going to happen. How would I tell my wife and my parents? *This cannot be real*, I thought all through the long drive home.

Back home, I repeated what the neurologist had said to my wife. Even then, I did not fully grasp the seriousness of the situation and went about my life, telling myself that this situation wasn't dangerous. I let this positive thought drive out all the doubt in my mind, and as I repeated this mantra to myself over and over, I started to believe it.

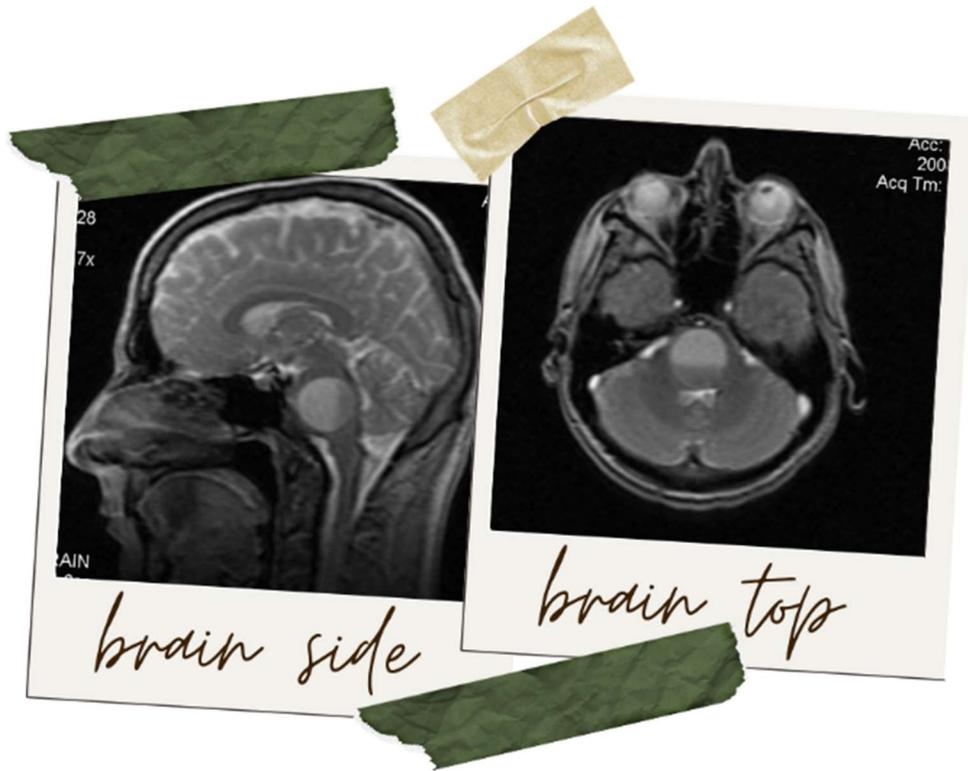
The CD

A couple days later, I decided to get the brain images from the hospital to see for myself what this was about. Back at the same imaging office, the lady checked my identification and told me it would be \$25 to get the CD with my brain scan images. I was told to come back the next day to pick it up. The next day arrived, the receptionist checked my identification once more, and I finally received my brain scan CD.

I found it very pleasing how easy it was to get access to my medical records. After receiving my CD, I drove back through the traffic and eventually got home. The minute my car was parked in the driveway, I ran downstairs to my computer and inserted the CD. I could not wait to see what the neurologist was talking about. After installing the necessary software to view the CD, I was finally able to see my brain for the very first time. Before me sat dozens of 3D images. I had no idea what I was looking at, but after patiently clicking through 30 of them, I saw something that looked like the shape of a brain.

Although I could now see my brain, I still had no idea what the neurologist was referring to since I could not distinguish the cyst from the various other objects in the brain. I was puzzled as the pictures did not resemble what I imagined a brain would look like. It took another 30 minutes before I finally recognized a huge bubble on the brain stem. If I could describe the location of the cyst, it would be in the back-middle-top of my neck, just below the base of the skull.

I honestly did not see any trouble with the location of this cyst and saw no reason why removing it would cause the kind of operational risk to my life that I had been warned of.



The next day, I noticed that my vision was weaker. This had been gradually getting worse for a few days and was really starting to bug me, so I made an appointment to get my eyes checked. This was late May 2008, and my parents had just gotten back from vacation. I normally worked with my dad and had been running the family business while he was away; a lot was new to me, but I had managed. When I saw my dad back at work, he commented that my speech was slurred, but I did not think much of it and went home like normal. The next day, I had double vision. Sometimes when I was reading my email, all the words appeared in a weaker ghost image on the left side.

The Failed Eye Cure Attempt

I went to a laser eye clinic for a free eye exam, thinking maybe lasers could fix my eye problem. I went to the lobby, and after a brief conversation with the secretary, waited for my name to be called. A lady came out and called my name, and we entered the room. I was told to sit in a chair with a gray machine at eye level attached to a handle that led to the ceiling, and she began testing my eyes. She put some weird drops in my eyes, and after the test told me to be seated back in the lobby and wait for 20 minutes. I picked up a magazine to read, but quickly put it down as my eyes could not focus on anything. Soon enough, my name was called again.

Back in the room, more tests were done on my eyes and then I was told to rest in the lobby once more. Thirsty, I crossed the lobby to a water cooler and got a cup, but when I placed it underneath the tap, I couldn't read the label so I just threw the cup in the garbage and flopped back down in my chair. 10 minutes later, I was called back in.

I was at the eye clinic for eight hours in all. I got called by a different lady, with curly blonde hair and perfume so strong you could taste it. I followed her into her office, my eyes squinting, and she explained the procedure they recommended, the risk involved, and the cost. My eyes went big when I heard the price and the risk, and I left the room with my teeth clenched tight.

Driving home, I could not read the road signs, just the colors. I think I got honked at, but I made it home. A few days later, my double vision was back; even when I was driving, I saw two lanes and two of every vehicle, but I told myself, *Whatever*, and went on with my business.

Getting Contacts

Next, I got my eyes checked by Dr. Devram. He did not find anything wrong with my eyes except weak eyesight and offered me the choice between glasses and contacts. I was afraid of glasses, don't know why, so I chose contacts. A few days passed, and it was time to pick up my contacts. Dr. Devram showed me how to insert them into my eyes and how to remove them. He then had me sit in a chair with a mirror in front of me, the contacts on the table, and practice removing and inserting them until I could do it comfortably. Once this became easy, I was able to leave.

With the contacts in, everything was back to normal, or so I thought. I left the optometrist's office with a satisfied grin on my face from having solved this problem.

The next day, however, I ate a banana and immediately felt like vomiting. During my lunch break at work, resting in my office after reviewing and pricing out different projects, the nausea got so bad that I needed to leave. My wife was working, and I did not want to be alone in my situation, so I went to my parents' house. I told my mom of my continuing unwellness and went to lie down after drinking a cup of tea, but I did not tell her the details of my situation. I did not want to worry her; plus, I was afraid of the information spreading and I did not feel up to explaining everything to more people. A few hours passed, and the nausea went away, so I went back home. Everything seemed normal for about two weeks, so when the nurse came each day - usually the same nurse - and asked if anything was different, I would say no. She was quite nice, but to me this seemed like a waste of time.

One evening, we had my parents over to our house for a late supper of baked pork with sauce. After dinner, we showed them my MRI images. But this caused unwellness in me, so I went to lie down. It was strange; I suddenly found myself unable to cope with multiple sounds, even numerous voices in a room, and would just need to get away from the noise. When I tried to ignore my body's feedback, the unwellness would just keep getting worse, and I would start to get dizzy. But after around 20 minutes of lying down, my symptoms disappeared. I drank some coffee, then rejoined my wife and parents on the living room couch where we discussed my situation for hours. Finally, seeing night outside the window, my parents realized it was time to go. After making me promise to keep them updated about my health, they left for home.

The next day, I told my doctor that I felt nauseous, and he told me to report to the same neurologist again. I drove slowly to his office, my skin turning red from nervousness and my hands getting sweaty in anticipation of the visit. When I told him what had been happening to

me, I was sent for another picture of my brain. When I reported back, the neurologist told me the cyst had increased in size and they had no choice but to operate. With that news, I turned red instantly, and I could feel the sweat dripping underneath my T-shirt, my legs wanting to buckle, and my body shaking all over. I left the neurologist's office with watery eyes from barely suppressed crying. I did not know how to tell this news to my wife. I got into my car slowly, closed the door, and gradually put the key in the ignition. The car started to move, and I drove off ever so reluctantly, my head filled with thoughts of the operation.

When I got home, I was comforted to see the house nicely illuminated on the street. I parked in the driveway, getting out slowly; everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I carefully turned the key in the front door to slow the time until I would need to report what I had been told at my appointment. Wobbly, and with watery eyes, I trudged up the stairs, dropped down on the couch, and with my voice cracking, called for my wife to tell her the news.

Chapter 3 | Hospital Stay

We traveled the next day to Hamilton General Hospital and met with the surgeon who would be performing the operation. He looked at my brain scan images, then back at me. I had no desire for a repeat of what I had heard from the neurologist, especially with my wife sitting next to me, but he gave us the information anyway. I was then admitted to the hospital to spend the night before my surgery.

Late afternoon was all right at the hospital; I had the room to myself, and the nurse came every few hours to check things like my pulse and temperature. For one of the checks, I had to lift my right leg up. However, the nighttime was totally different. Imagine you are in bed, and each time you fall asleep, a nurse comes and wakes you up to check on you. This meant checking my pulse, my blood pressure, and everything else, even raising my right leg, and I am not exaggerating when I say this happened five times. I got no sleep that night.

In the morning, I had to mentally prepare myself for a tough conversation with my parents. I knew I had to tell them that if things went sour, they should go on without me. I realized this was a conversation I never really practiced, and every time these thoughts came into my head, my eyes would tear up and my forehead would begin to sweat. Still, I knew it had to be done.

My mom brought me beet juice to drink, and let me tell you, this was the worst aftertaste I ever had in my life. I could only manage a quarter of the glass before I had to put it down. I started my talk, and even though I had tried to prepare for it, I still felt color coming to my cheeks. My heart started beating faster, the tears appeared in my eyes, and in a quiet, cracking voice I was beginning to say the words I had been practicing, but I never had the chance to finish them because I was interrupted by my parents, who gave words of encouragement that could have come out of a movie: “Everything will be okay,” and “There’s nothing to worry about.” This was a very emotional conversation, and although I tried, it was hard to keep the sadness off my face.

I do not remember everything that was said in that moment, but I do remember the hug and the bittersweet feeling at the end. After the conversation with my parents, my wife came in and gave me some more encouragement.

Then the surgeon came in and told me they could not go ahead with the operation because it was too dangerous, but they would continue to monitor me. With that, I was sent home. I was told this while sitting in bed in my blue hospital gown, and I must say this news gave me a strange mix of disappointment and relief.

Before heading home, I had another brain scan to see if any changes had occurred, and it showed the cyst had grown bigger once again. The neurologist was surprised that it had not burst yet; but still did not suggest doing anything about it. I could feel myself getting angry at their inaction as I left the doctor’s office. I drove myself home, shaking and with my hands warm to the touch.

Time for a Second Opinion

My mother-in-law referred me to a neurosurgeon at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto who might be able to give a second opinion since nothing was being done. I showed him the pictures from my MRI and asked what he would suggest. He told me to have a seat and he would present my two options. He would be able to remove the cyst, but the way it was done would be up to me. My eyes opened wide and I gave him my full attention to hear the choices.

There was an easier way which would cause more damage to me; I would not be able to walk, I would lose all sensation on my left side, the right side of my face would be paralyzed, and my coordination would be off. The second choice was harder to access but would result in less damage to me; maybe just some changes on the left side with some weakness in my left arm. If he was unsuccessful in eliminating the problem, he would just drain the cyst to relieve the pressure it was causing in my brain, and by the time it grew back, I would be in my nineties. With that information, the meeting ended, and I was left to think about my options.

Chapter 4 | Fed Up

With these choices in mind, I started to take matters into my own hands by doing some research. When we got home from the doctor's, the first thing I did was sit down at the kitchen table, open my laptop, and begin to gather some information about the brain. I stumbled on an article that said if you do not consume fat, tumors and cysts cannot survive. This article got my attention and I read it a few times and did some further research. I noticed there was lots of positive feedback from people who had followed the article's recommendation.

Intrigued, I decided to eliminate some fat from my diet.

I went further and began reading books and magazines on the topic. I had had enough of not knowing. Everything the doctors were telling me was gibberish, a language I did not understand. I turned red and got thirsty, so I got myself a glass of vodka, drank half, and then came straight back to my laptop to research some more.

I went back to the article about fat and read it a couple more times. There was a chart that told the amount of fat in many common food items, and you were not allowed to go over a certain amount per day. But I decided to go to the extreme and eliminate fat altogether. I started to eat only things that were green. In the morning I usually ate asparagus, and at lunch some green salad. Whenever I started to feel hungry, I just ate celery to stop the hunger. I drank only water and consumed only green foods.

Meanwhile, I became deeply knowledgeable about the brain. I was finally able to read MRI scans and distinguish the parts of the brain and their functions. Even with no formal education in this area, I taught myself things that many doctors in the field are unaware of. I learned that there were other ways this surgery could take place, but that they would involve making an incision in parts of the brain that were not well documented. Surgeons only operate on parts of the brain that are fully understood to avoid damaging the brain. No one was willing to enter the unknown part even though it would have made the operation easier and safer. Knowing this made me angry. How can you make progress if you do not try?

The phone rang, it was my parents inviting us for steak dinner. Of course, we accepted, but I told them I could not eat meat and would explain later. The sun was bright and high in the sky, and you could feel the dryness in the air. We got into the car and my wife started passing other cars like we were late for an appointment. My parents met us in the driveway, and I briefly explained my situation, but not in detail—not wanting to worry them, I made up most of the story, but did explain the no-fat method. It was hard seeing everyone eating steak while I ate asparagus. Seeing and hearing the juicy steak being cut and chewed made me rethink everything. After I had washed down my green dinner with a glass of water, my wife and I headed home.

Let us just say after the second day on my new diet, my energy level dropped big time. But I did not let this discourage me. I kept on eating my asparagus, adding some butter and salt for flavor. I kept this up for about a week, but then I pooped green, which really freaked me out and that was it for this diet.

At this point, I decided it was time to take some time off work. I tried to tell the secretary what was happening, but I could not hold it together and burst into tears in front of her. She told me it would not be an issue because she would handle my phone calls. Taking the time off work helped me think about my situation and the things that I had to do. Let us just say that thinking about this sucked; I would rather have worked and been busy than think about my condition. I tried to occupy myself by doing things I liked, however, thoughts of my health never quite left me. They were always in the back of my mind, silently reminding me everything was not okay. Crazy thoughts about the worst-case scenario went through my mind. Just in case I did not make it, I prepared documentation for my parents: Internet passwords, online banking, home phone, internet provider, and so on. I wanted to make sure all the details of my life would be explained so they would not have a difficult time. With tears in my eyes, I also prepared a list of things that needed attention that I had not gotten to yet so I would not be leaving a mess if things went sour.

My monitoring schedule said I was to do another brain scan to see if anything had changed. This seemed repetitive and a complete waste of time; I already knew what the result would be. Comparing the images I'd already had, I knew the cyst would have grown once again.

In the meantime, anything that I consumed was vomited up and just made me red. On the way to the hospital for the brain scan, my wife drove fast and passed cars so we would get there before I got nauseous in the car, but we still had to stop so I could throw up. We pulled into a parking lot next to a blue car, and I am sure they had a nice surprise seeing my textured brown puddle of food chunks by the driver's door. We got back on the road, but once again the nausea came, and we stopped in a different parking lot. I swung the door open and you could see the redness on my face as I leaned out the door, but nothing happened. I waited a couple minutes to make sure, leaning out the door, but still nothing. I leaned back in my seat, closed the door, and told my wife to step on it before this occurred again.

As we approached St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton, I was wondering how I would be able to lie in the machine for 20 minutes for the brain scan to finish. In the lobby, I suddenly had the nauseous feeling again. I quickly jogged past all the people in the hallway, and not looking back, pushed my way into the washroom, closed the stall door, knelt by the toilet bowl, and put my head inside. But nothing happened. I waited for 10 minutes, then got up and went to my appointment on the second floor. Luckily, there was no one else in the elevator. I went straight to the window at the brain scan department and told the lady who I was. The machine was already set up and she escorted me to the machine. She could see my wobble, the redness and the sweat that had just started to appear. She helped me lie down in the machine, and as she pushed me inside the tunnel, I began to pray that I would not need to use the red "In Case of Emergency" button.

Luckily, I lasted the whole scan and even the drive home was uneventful.

A few days went by, and still I could not hold anything down. No matter what I tried to eat or drink, it all came back up in the toilet after five minutes.

You could now see redness constantly on my face, and my voice sounded firm. To get some nutrients into my body, I bought some energy liquids, energy bars, and multivitamins. *Something*

must stay down, I thought. I started to question a lot of what the doctors had said, but my biggest question was why nothing was being done and they were just monitoring my situation until my body gave up.

Looking in the mirror that week, I started to see my bones. I was able to notice the dramatic changes that come with losing weight so rapidly—one day I was relaxing on the couch when the phone rang, and I tried to get up, but to my surprise, I couldn't even lift my body. I was confused, but on the second try I managed to get up and answer the phone. I walked to the bedroom to take a nap, and when I woke up, I saw stars out the window.

I slept until the sunrise was coming in the window, then started to get dressed. I swung my legs off the bed, planting my feet on the floor and trying to push myself up, but I could not do it. My heart started to pound rapidly in my chest, spots of blackness danced into my vision, and I started to twitch. After relaxing for five minutes in bed with a variety of thoughts going through my head, most of them negative, I gave it another try.

I started to put on socks first, which meant reaching down to the floor, but looking this way made me see objects moving everywhere. I raised my head up to resume my sitting position on the side of the bed, stopped everything, and just looked at the wall, praying for my vision to return to normal. I stayed quiet, not wanting to wake my wife, who was in bed beside me. After I had stared at the wall for 10 minutes, everything returned to normal and I got up.

I remember we had some people over later in the afternoon, and I started being very wobbly and once again slurring my words as if I had been drinking heavily. I could not pay attention to anything that was happening, and the multiple voices and other noises jumbled together in my head. Trying to focus on one just gave me a headache. After 10 minutes of this, I decided to lie down. I walked to my bedroom, red in the face, and slammed the door behind me. On the bed, I squeezed the pillow between my hands in frustration and kicked the blanket upward, my heels coming down on the mattress several times. Then I closed my eyes and fell asleep, but I woke to light shining on my face through the window. At least my symptoms were gone when I got up. I felt kind of rude for taking a nap when I had guests over, but they understood my situation and no feelings were hurt.