

# Contents

Acknowledgments	8
1. Lost Vision	11
2. Blind Faith	23
3. Noticing Differences	33
4. First Glance	43
5. Cloudy View	55
6. Hopeful Outlook	67
7. Blurred Sight	79
8. Optical Nerve	91
9. Seeing Truth	101

# Lost Vision

**H**eavenly Father, I know I'm not seeing right, I prayed as I stood in the family room listening to my parents discuss what had to be the worst news of my almost ten years of life. *Dear God, please help!*

"Dad," I said, "there's no way we can move. You can't coach at Virginia State. My life is here!" I yelled loudly, as if my forceful tone would change my father's mind.

Placing one hand on my shoulder, Dad gently replied, "Calm down, Carmen. I know Charlottesville has been your home all your life, but it's time to move on."

"I don't want to move on! This isn't fair," I argued, stepping away.

"Now, just a minute, young lady," my

dad, Charles Browne, said with a stern face. “You aren’t the only one who has to make a sacrifice. All of us—your mother, your brother, and your little sister—will be giving up things as well. If it weren’t a good opportunity, I wouldn’t even be moving our family. Besides, we’re not even leaving the state. You’ll love Ettrick.”

I dashed to my room, burst into tears, and threw myself on my canopy bed. How could my parents be so insensitive? Ever since I was in kindergarten, I’d been waiting for the day that I could run the school as a sixth grader. My year was finally approaching. I was just one year away. Now I had to move. Why was my life so crazy? *Why, Lord?*

I rolled over and stared from beneath my canopy at the bright white ceiling and the banana-colored walls. With my arms folded defiantly across my chest, I cried aloud, “Well, I’m not going. I’ll ask Jillian’s parents if I can live with them till I graduate from high school. I’m over there all the time anyway.”

My best friend, Jillian Gray, and I were inseparable. I hoped the Grays would love to have me as part of their family.

As I thought of a change in my surroundings, I hit the pillow to let out my frustrations. “Jillian would make a better sister than the one I’ve got anyway,” I grumbled.

For one thing, I wouldn’t have to worry about Jillian going into my stuff all the time, like my eight-year-old sister, Cassie, did. That morning she’d broken my gold

chain, which she had no business wearing in the first place. When I caught her with it on, she pulled it off real quick.

It was also annoying that Cassie used my hair grease. I wouldn't have to worry about that with Jillian. She wasn't black like me. Jillian was white. She told me that her hair was so straight and fine with natural oil, so she didn't need to use any.

Since Jillian was an only child, I wouldn't have to worry about an older brother. Every time I tried to watch television, my irritating brother, Clay, came in and changed the channel. He just surfed from station to station, not really watching anything. And he picked on me about everything. Yeah, I could definitely do without his big twelve-year-old mouth.

My folks wouldn't miss me anyway. After a year, Mom's at-home business was finally taking off. She was a visual artist and did pretty well at selling her paintings. My father was an assistant football coach for the University of Virginia. When it was football season, he was hardly ever around. With me gone, they'd have one less kid to worry about.

After about twenty minutes, I had completely sold myself on the idea. Now all I had to do was come up with a plan.



After dinner, my family headed to the garage to pack up stuff in there, but thankfully I didn't have to help. Since my mother knew I was sad about the move, she encouraged Dad to let me stay in my room. This would be my time to think without them nearby.

As soon as they went to the garage, I started packing. I couldn't take everything, but some items were essential. I stuffed my CDs, posters, headset, my Bible, and a few of my favorite clothes in two suitcases.

Writing a letter explaining my disappearance was next. But that was tough. Everything I felt inside sounded wrong when I wrote it down on paper and read it back to myself.

After several rushed attempts, I came up with this:

*Dear Family,*

*I love you all, but I cannot, will not, should not move. So I'm running away. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. You all move on and I will see you if you come back to visit. That is, if I don't have other plans. Take care of each other.*

*Carmen*



Gazing around my room, I almost had second thoughts. *How could I run away?* I wondered. Quickly, I realized that it was no time to get all mushy. It was now or

never. I picked up the two suitcases, jetted through the hall, opened the front door, and locked the wooden door. I dashed past my closed garage, hoping it would not open. Then I rushed two houses down to Jillian's.

I rang the doorbell ten times, hoping someone would open it. When that never happened, I hated that I hadn't called first. If I kept standing there on the front porch, my parents would spot me. So I marched around to the backyard and sat on the redwood deck.

A few minutes later, I heard a car pull up out front. I peeked around the corner of the house and saw Mr. and Mrs. Gray pulling into the driveway in their pretty new white Jeep. When I saw them unload a few bags from stores in the mall, I realized they had just gone shopping. My best friend's parents were so cool. They always bought her tons of clothes. I knew they'd do the same for me if I lived with them.

"Jillian," I whispered loudly, peeking from around the bushes as she started following her parents inside. When she turned and saw me, I said, "I need your help."

My friend was taller than me. She had short strawberry blonde hair. Big freckles covered her face. We had been close since nursery school, but I'd never needed her more than that moment.

Jillian snuck over to where I was hiding. "Carmen, what's wrong?"

"I need to stay here until I graduate from high school," I confided.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

I pointed to my suitcases, still sitting on the deck. “Help me get my things inside, and I’ll explain everything.”

As we stretched across Jillian’s bed, I told her about the move. We both started weeping.

“I can’t imagine a world without you in it,” she wailed. “Of course you can move in with me.”

We spent about an hour talking about how cool it would be to be sisters. Exchanging secrets until dawn would make our every-night slumber parties extra fun.

“Let’s go tell my parents,” Jillian suggested. “I’m sure they’ll be okay with you living here.”

As we started down the stairs, I heard the angry voice of my father. Jillian and I stopped on the fifth step from the bottom, listening to him rant and rave. All of our excitement vanished.

“I’ve got to get my stuff and get out of here,” I told Jillian in a panicky whisper.

“Where will you go?” my friend asked, her eyes wide.

I had no answer. My grandparents all lived in Durham, North Carolina. And I didn’t have any other close friends.

Taking a deep breath, I took the last five steps and bravely entered the living room. My mother threw her arms around me the instant she saw me. I felt sorry for causing her pain. My stomach ached as bad as if I had the flu.

“Oh, baby,” Mom gasped with relief. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“I’m okay, Ma,” I said, wiggling out of her hug. “I’m sorry I worried you. I just thought—”

My father cut me off. “That’s the problem—you didn’t think. Carmen, I am sick of this foolishness. Get your things right now, say good-bye to Jillian, and let’s go home.”

“But Dad, I—”

“Close your mouth right now, Carmen Lynn Browne! Do not say one more word. We’ll talk about this at home.” My father opened the Grays’ back door. Mom mumbled something to Mr. and Mrs. Gray.

I looked at Jillian, then followed my parents, wishing this wasn’t happening to me.



I was put on punishment for a week. No phone, no friends, and no television. My father said I was acting too grown-up and needed to be reminded who was in charge.

Those seven days were spent packing boxes of stuff. That was even harder to take than the grounding. It finally hit me that I was leaving my entire world behind.

As I pouted in my bedroom, while looking at my fourth-grade yearbook, my little sister came in—without knocking, as usual. She held out a cherry Popsicle toward me, cherry juice dripping through her fingers.



I just stared at her for a while. For the most part, Cassie was a good sister. Even though she got on my nerves, I still loved her.

I finally took the Popsicle, smiled, and said, “You’re being awful sweet.”

“I don’t want to move either,” she said. “But if I have to go, I want you to go too.”

What a cool thing to say! When I first thought of living with Jillian and her family, I thought no one would miss me. At least my little sister cared.

“Cassie,” my dad called from the doorway, “please go downstairs and help your brother pack the videos. We need to speak to your sister alone.”

As my sister scurried out, I saw my mom standing behind my father. They both came in and sat on my bed, leaving no space between them.

I had been a perfect angel on punishment, but as I sat down, I felt nervous. Their faces looked serious. Maybe they were going to extend my suffering.

“Mom . . . Dad,” I said, “I want to apologize for being such a bother lately.”

“Looks like you’ve been busy in here.” I looked around my bare-walled room. Labeled boxes covered the floor. “You go, girl.” My dad gave me a high five, finally turning back into the cool, fun, laid-back dad I was used to.

My mother put her arm around me. “Since next week is the Fourth of July and your tenth birthday, your father

and I thought you might want to have a party. It would be a nice way to say good-bye to your friends.”

“Thanks!” I said, a huge grin plastered across my face.

As soon as they left my room, I started making my invitation list. I included every friend I had.

I started to feel better about my parents. I knew Dad didn't want to move any more than the rest of us. He was just trying his best to provide a good living for us. Now opportunity was having us knock on a different door.

My dad had been involved in sports all his life. He'd graduated from the University of North Carolina with a degree in physical education, and then he became an all-pro wide receiver for the Washington Redskins.

For the last five years, he had been a coach at the University of Virginia. I remembered him telling me that it took more than his abilities and qualifications to land that job. I was only five years old at the time, so I didn't understand what he meant. I still didn't get it. What team wouldn't want a man who'd played three years in the National Football League? People love being around pro players. All I knew was that my dad wanted a promotion, and he didn't get it. I prayed that maybe one day the blanks of the story would be filled in.



The days passed slowly, and yet every time I thought about moving day, it didn't feel like I had enough time.

When the day of my party finally arrived, Jillian came over to help set up. Hanging pink and yellow balloons and streamers all over the family room reminded us of all the parties we'd had together over the years. Even though I was the only black girl in our class, Jillian never made me feel different.

"Jillian," I said as we put paper plates and cups on the table, "I prayed to God last night that you and I will always be friends. I know we won't be able to talk every day on the phone, have slumber parties all the time, or walk down the hallways together at school. It would just be nice to have a friend like you in my life forever."

"Well, Miss Serious, as long as I have breath you'll have me as a friend," she said jokingly, letting loose into my face the air of a balloon she'd just blown up.

My guests started arriving right at five o'clock. Clay and Cassie got to invite a few of their friends too. When Mom said I had to share the party with my brother and sister, I started to protest. Then I realized it wasn't just my birthday party. The three of us were celebrating things that would never be, at least not here in Charlottesville. No going to the skating rinks with these people. No spring breaks to fill with fun, and no more summers together.

Everybody had a fun time. Music and laughter filled our house one last time. I walked over to Mom and brushed a tear from her flushed cheeks.

"Pumpkin," she said to me, "I'm so glad you're having

a wonderful time. It's good to see a smile on your face. I know you still have reservations about moving, but I promise you . . . I'll do whatever I can to help make your adjustment easy.”

I hugged her, and as I watched her walk away, I kept her last words with me. I wasn't ready to move, but I now realized there was no way I could stay someplace without my family. My home was wherever my dad, mom, Clay, and Cassie lived. Home wasn't only a city or a house. Home—my home—was in love. I was just thankful the Lord let me see; I no longer had lost vision.



# Blind Faith

**D**uring our first two weeks of living in Ettrick, Virginia, about two hours south of my old hometown, we still hadn't had a chance to get out and explore our new surroundings. The weather had been bad. The days were so dark and cloudy, no kids played outside. The hard thunder and lightning had kept my family in the windowless bathroom most nights.

One family's house in our new neighborhood caught on fire when lightning struck the roof. It caused a blast of flames on the top level. Good thing, no one was hurt. After the storm passed, we heard on the news that twelve people in the area lost their lives. We prayed for those victims and their families. I

must admit, it was difficult feeling sadness for people I didn't know. But when I remembered how afraid I felt night after night, it was easy to relate to the pain those strangers went through.

I wasn't crazy about being in this new place, but surviving the storm gave me another outlook on my situation. I was alive! Mom said God spared our lives for a purpose. Although I couldn't see the reason, I was thankful for another day—even if it was in Ettrick, Virginia.



“Finally, we're out of the house!” my sister screamed with joy to my brother and me.

The three of us headed to the corner store. Our mission was to buy Popsicles to fight off the ninety-six-degree heat. I wish I could've hung out with friends, but since we knew no one in the area, Clay, my bookworm brother, and Cassie, my bothersome sister, had become my best friends.

London's Grocery was farther away than we thought. Cassie started complaining about being tired. Even though her whining was annoying, I was worn out too. So I suggested we call Mom to come get us. Clay, trying to be tough, said we could take the shortcut home.

“What shortcut?” I asked my brother.

“The path through the woods over there,” Clay replied confidently. “It has to lead to our neighborhood.”

See . . . look down the path. The dirt curves toward where we live.”

“I don’t want to go through there,” Cassie said, holding Clay’s arm tightly. “A snake might get us. And those bushes are thick. It looks too dark and scary.”

*Dark and scary* were definitely words I’d use to describe that gloomy route. With all the brains Clay had, I didn’t know why he was crazy enough to think I’d be willing to travel that unknown road. Nevertheless, he finally convinced me and Cassie to trust him. He promised to lead us home safely and quickly.

“It only makes sense to go this way,” he continued to argue as we followed him into the woods. “The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.”

The shaded path was cool, at least. And no strange insects bothered us. All we heard was the peaceful chirping of three robins nestled on some branches.

All of a sudden I smelled something weird in the air. For a second, I thought it might be a fire. But the odor was stronger than regular smoke. The view in front of us changed from clear to cloudy.

“You guys smell that?” I asked my brother and sister.

“Yeah.” Cassie coughed. “I can hardly breathe.”

As we inched closer to the origin of the smoke, we noticed three boys. They had to be teenagers, because they were big. They looked kinda rough and tough. They were arguing with one another over something. I didn’t want to find out what.



“Get off me, man,” the shortest of the three said to his buddy in a panic. “Look over there. Someone’s checkin’ us out. Quick, put it out.”

I started to turn back and take my little sister with me. But the boys spotted us, and we froze. I stopped dead in my tracks as a tall, dark-skinned, bald-headed, buff guy walked up to my brother and asked, “Hey, lil’ homey, what you doin’ out here? Ain’t you scared of the boogey-man? Or snakes?”

Cassie peeked from behind Clay and asked, “Are there snakes out here?”

“There’s one, lil’ sista . . . me. My name is Snake. And you kids better be worried about me. If you ever sneak up on me and my crew again, I’ll bite.”

I didn’t know much about gangs, violence, alcohol, or drugs. Our parents never let us watch violent stuff on television. In Charlottesville, where we moved from, we didn’t see a lot of rough kids or gangs. I figured Snake must have been this boy’s code name, nickname, or gang name. Surely his mother wouldn’t name him that.

Every part of me wanted to run away. But the three of them made a triangle around us.

Snake held a short, white, smoking object in front of Clay. It looked a little like a cigarette. Snake asked my brother if he wanted to take “a hit.”

Despite the fear on Clay’s face, he stood up to Snake and said, “Naw, man, thanks . . . but no thanks. If y’all

don't mind, my sisters and I are just trying to find our way home."

Clay tried to walk around them, motioning Cassie and me to follow. I stood still when the big guy cut off our path.

"No one says no to Snake," he snarled. "Quit actin' like a punk."

"Just let us get by. You won't have to worry about seeing us again."

"Where do y'all live?" Snake pried.

I did not want this bully knowing how to find us. But the eight-year-old big mouth obviously didn't understand that.

"We live in Trojan Pines," Cassie announced.

"Oh, y'all rich black kids," Snake snapped, looking down on us. "Guess we better leave y'all alone. Or maybe messing with you will be extra fun."

The short guy yelled from behind me, "Go on an' let 'em pass, Snake."

Snake gave his friends an evil eye. He hesitated a second, then looked back at my brother. "Looks like it's your day. My boy Rock thinks I ought to let y'all through." Snake grabbed Clay's collar. "Don't let me catch you on this path again. And I was just testin' you about smokin'. You passed! Now get on outta here."

I wanted to tell those boys that if they stopped smokin' bad stuff, maybe they could have a better life. And the name Snake was yucky. However, I was smart

and kept my comments to myself, just praying things would turn around for them.

The three of us ran all the way home. We were so happy to see the two-story redbrick building. Once safely in the driveway, we made a pact not to mention this to our parents. We were scared we might get in trouble with our parents, and those dudes, if we blabbed.

Unfortunately, when we got to the door, our mother was waiting with a not-so-happy look on her face. When we confessed to her what happened, she was especially disappointed with Clay because he was the oldest and should have been more responsible. However, she praised him for taking responsibility by admitting that taking the shortcut was his idea. Even though I couldn't wait to get older, it's not so fun taking all the weight sometimes.



That next week the three of us became homebodies again. Our one adventure outside the neighborhood was enough excitement to last for a while.

At church on Sunday, my mother met our neighbor whose home had been badly damaged by the storm. They were living in a hotel until their place was fixed. Mrs. Anderson and my mom learned they had a lot in common. Both had a son and two daughters, all of us about the same ages. Mom invited them over for dinner and

fellowship that evening so we could do something loving for a family in need.

Mom had the house spotless, and it smelled better than a bakery in the early morning. All the packing boxes were put away, and everything was in its place. For the first time, our house felt like a home. When the Andersons arrived, our family was excited.

Mrs. Anderson's older daughter was a shy girl named Riana. Her skin was the color of the sand on the beaches. Instantly, I loved her long, straight hair. My hair wasn't short, but hers had mine beat. We were about the same height, and I wondered if we could be friends. I showed her to my room. The two of us just sat there, quiet as mice nibbling on cheese.

Cassie and Riana's little sister, Rolanda, were running up and down the stairs, apparently pretending their Barbie dolls were flying in a helicopter. Clay and his new best buddy, KJ, short for Kevin Jr., were playing computer games. My dad and Mr. Anderson talked about the upcoming football season for the Trojans, where my dad would be coaching.

"Are you going into the fifth grade too?" Riana asked me.

"Yep," I answered.

"I can introduce you to lots of people at school. You won't have to worry about being the new kid on the block. Since you have me as a friend, you'll have plenty of pals. Before you know it, you won't even miss your old friends."

Riana knew nothing about my old friends or me. Even though she was trying to help me adjust, there was no way I could ever forget my best friend, Jillian.

“Friends mean a lot to me,” I said. “Not everyone knows how to be a true friend.”

“I know you were probably tight with someone at your old school. Finding somebody to take that place won’t be easy. But we just left church. Where’s your faith?”

Even if I could replace Jillian, I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Give me a shot at being your buddy,” Riana urged me. “You know, whenever I’m a little afraid to take a risk, my mom says I’m like a baby bird that’s never flown. Until it leaves the tree and spreads its wings, that little bird will never know it can fly.”

Even though her words made sense, I wasn’t ready to let a new friend in. Besides, the experience with Snake and his crew was bothering me. And I was still shaken up by last week’s storms. All those things added together really scared me. Trying to get through it all was all I could do to make it past dinner.



After I said my prayers that night, Mom came into my room. She sat on the bed and gently placed my head in her lap. Braiding my hair, she said, “Baby, I know there’s

something wrong. If you want to share it, I'm all ears. Maybe I can make whatever isn't right better."

"Why hasn't Jillian called me?" I asked my mom. "I've been gone for two weeks, and I've left her two messages."

Mom said, "Just give her a chance; maybe she's just busy, honey."

Next, I told my mom how afraid I was of storms. "When the rain comes, I get frightened. What if the hail messes stuff up or the lightning starts a fire?" I started to shake. Tears fell down my face, but I felt comfort in my mother's arms.

After kissing me on the forehead, she uttered softly, "Second Timothy 1:7 says, 'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.' Carmen, I don't know what tomorrow holds either. I get afraid sometimes too. But I believe the Lord holds our future. He loves us. Next time you feel afraid, just recite that Scripture. Though you can't see God, He's there. Then you can face the future with a smile. I call that stepping out happily on blind faith."