

CLINT BEATTIE

Into The LIGHT

Clint's story is one which should bring hope to those who are given no hope. He has been through fire and come forth as gold. May this story encourage you that you , too, can have the victory.

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Chapter One



Entering the Valley

It had been a bad night. There was still a dull pain, which infiltrated all facets of my head. The freshness of morning and bright winter sun seemed to sedate the lingering pain of a migraine episode. My head felt heavy and throbbed. My scalp felt like it was going to burst and my mind felt like sleeping. My stomach turned and churned and lingering vomit seemed to stalk my stomach. A cloud hovered over me as I was drawn towards sporting glory. Boyhood anticipation of tackles, rucks, malls and footballs, helped to lessen the discomfort of a dying adolescent.

As dad pulled the car into the car park, I couldn't hold in my enormous stomach pain for a second more. I decorated dad's car with last night's spaghetti bolognese. Every drop missed my freshly pressed rugby shirt and shorts, polished Adidas football boots and faded black and white footy socks. It seemed that Pro Hart had been busy on the interior of dad's car.

After vomiting for what seemed an eternity, I stopped.

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Dad consoled me in my pain but I had no intention of staying in this sick state for another second. Sure I felt a little strange but it would take more than a 'stomach bug' to dethrone me from being the greatest full back to ever grace the stage of GPS football. There was rugby on offer and I loved rugby. The rugby I had trained for and wanted to excel at was under 30 minutes away.

I would go to bed feeling pretty normal. Often after the rough and tumble of footy practice, I dreamt of the next day in uninterrupted sleep until the pattern of rest was shaken. A pounding head and sore stomach broke my sweet slumber. Cold sweat dripped over my brow as the pain became evident at around 3.00am. Nausea and a headache combined to flood me. The pain felt like my whole brain was under attack and as it turns out, it was. Most occasions I threw up under the intense pain. The target of pain was almost impossible to identify. Intense agony seemed to cover every facet of my skull. My head throbbed and pulsed in fiery bursts, igniting it into a ball of excruciating pain.

Panadeine was my saviour in those early times. I struggled to search for the tablets myself, under the pain's stranglehold. I fumbled around in the medication tub and hoped to find something to alleviate my distress. My mum and dad jumped in to fill in the gap, helping me in my quest for relief. The wait seemed an eternity in itself. It felt like I took a spectator's view of my pain and just waited for the tablet to take effect, monitoring very closely how much pain I was in before medication and waiting impatiently for the tablet to take full

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effect. A sanctuary of pain-free living followed but it was only a temporary reprieve. It nullified the force of my aching head but neglected its source. A dull, lingering pain remained. My dad would kneel beside my huddled and crouched figure. He told me I was a brave boy, whilst I hurled under the pain. It softened the blow.

For six months, the previous scene was repeated sporadically, with increased force. Medical doctors guided us towards diet and stress as possible causes of my throbbing head. We pursued this train of thought. Changing my diet and more specifically eliminating dairy from my life, proved much more of a challenge than first predicted. Full cream milk, yoghurt and cheese became off-limit foods. I have learnt since that while all things are possible, eliminating dairy from my life was ridiculous. My love affair with dairy started when I was much younger.

My favourite book when I was four was a book about some mice eating cheese. It impacted me and explained my fetish. The psychologist Ivan Pavlov talks extensively about the physiological response to food we have as humans, in that our bodies will instinctively increase their saliva production at even the hint of food. As I read about the mice in the story enjoying the dairy object of their delight, lunch time came early that day as my desire was born to consume cheese. Inspired, I raided the fridge and before I knew it cheese had become a close companion and in no time at all was transported from the dish to my waiting stomach. Milk was also a permanent resident in my life. It didn't leave my side from the breakfast

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bowl full of 'Rice Bubbles' to the numerous glasses I poured throughout the day, to quench my thirst for dairy. I didn't even require chocolate or strawberry additives to spice up its flavour. It had enough flavour on its own. Suffice to say my family's and my efforts at eliminating dairy from my life at the onset of ill health in my life were unsuccessful. Round two commenced in the quest for answers.

Stress became the new candidate. After all it was my first year of high school and I was on the brink of starting adolescence - it seemed logical. Physiological change was par for the course at my age and coupled with the social pressures of my first year of high school, things appeared to point towards circumstance and life stage as the cause of my new sickness. But the headaches were too severe and we knew it. It eventually became clear that it was something more serious.

Diet and adolescent blues were gradually ruled out as the source of my pain. The problem lay elsewhere and was greater than we could ever imagine

Dr Saad now considered the remote possibility of a greater evil lurking in my body. Every time he alluded to a deeper problem, for some reason I didn't hear his voice...I zoned out and could only hear the positive. My mind almost didn't allow me to hear it before a particular time. It seems to me I possibly wasn't ready to hear what would eventually become my reality.

It was at that time I was forced to have a CT scan on my brain. In the wake of the increased severity and frequency of migraine headaches, we were referred to take the CT scans

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and see a neurologist named Dr Mckenzie.

‘Take some pills and see me in a week.’ Thoughts of what Dr McKenzie might say filtered through my mind. I remembered my past visits to men with stethoscopes, and because they had been uneventful, it seemed like history was just going to repeat itself. Even despite the obvious increased strength and regularity of the headaches, we were ill-prepared for the life changing diagnosis that day. To me it appeared no different from my previous experience of an ailment fixed by antibiotics and a comment on how brave I was. I expected a positive outcome like the rest of our history had presented to that date. With no experience to the contrary, we strode into his rooms confident. I anticipated what was within my ability to manage, within my capability to control. I’d taken medicine before for a nasty cold so I knew the ropes. Some chicken pox and an infected, gaping wound on my forehead had taken me into the peril of a doctor’s surgery before.

No one really expects tragedy. Every bit of tragic news happens to someone else and we somehow feel separated from it; that is until it happens to us. Ten foot tall and bullet proof I think they call it...

As we waited before seeing Dr McKenzie a family stormed out of his surgery and into the waiting room. The expletives mouthed by the boy’s mother were directed towards our new doctor, whispered under her breath, but in earshot. Obviously furious at something, they rushed past us and out the door of the waiting room. A little stunned, it seemed we had no other choice than to enter the popular doctor’s cell! Our confidence

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was shaken in our doctor of choice, but it didn't really worry me - I knew all about doctors!

It was hard for me to miss cricket practice that afternoon. The appointment fell on my favourite part of the week and was grossly inconvenient. The thought of others enjoying the battle between willow and leather and me being a 'no show' was truly horrific. It seemed too severe a sacrifice for me to make, just to chat to a smart guy with a medical degree, whilst I could be burning up my exuberant youth on a slip's cradle.

We sat in Dr McKenzie's rooms while he looked at us over his glasses. I felt pretty casual sitting on an oversized chair, in a neurologist's room! I hadn't a clue what a neurologist was, save that he looked at scans of brains for a living. I hadn't been around all this stuff before. It didn't compute what was really going on, what that tomb-like ride the day before was and why I needed to have it. My personal history was being played out directly in front of my eyes through some photographs pinned up on a bright sheet of glass. It all seemed a little unnecessary.

I was aching for something to stop the headaches and help me get on with my sport. I envisaged the doctor prescribing me some sort of antibiotic, which would make me all better, like our local doctor did. I was looking forward to the free banana lolly for being such a brave boy, but on a quick scan around the surgery, it was lolly-free. That annoyed me and confirmed a suspicion I had harboured all along. Any doctor who doesn't have banana lollies in his surgery and is even open during cricket practice.... Well he must be a fraud!

He looked really sad. It was obvious he had some bad

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news. As I strained with my entire mind, in the two and a half milliseconds I had to dwell on what it might be, I came up with a total blank. He eventually choked out what the scans had revealed. An unidentified mass blocked fluid flow from the third ventricle into other areas of my brain. Specifically he pointed to my brain stem and its surrounding structures. We listened to the tale of my predicament, talk of pending brain surgery to relieve built-up fluid and my inevitable death, if action wasn't taken. Dr McKenzie said my whole brain was flooded with fluid. This spelled pain, increased headaches and deathly trouble if not dealt with. He spoke for a good five minutes but never had I been this affected by five minutes from someone in my life. In five minutes my whole life was turned on its head.

I don't think I reacted the way people with a life threatening diagnosis are supposed to react because there were no cues. If I shared such horrific news with a family I would find it necessary to dim the lights and change the colouring of the room into dark mood colours. For this scene it would have seemed appropriate to adorn the room a dark grey colour to at least give us some forewarning of the coming danger...

This scene was all wrong. At moments like these there is always music. In movies there is always dramatic music just before tragedy, almost to warn viewers of the pending doom, the soul-shaking moment to come. But there wasn't music even though the scene warranted it. It was quiet and lifeless, despite a significant plot point from the movie of my life being played out before my wide eyes. I wanted different lighting,

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emotive music and a better understanding of the next scene, so at least my part could be played well. I wanted to feel the right way in this moment, but nothing seemed to dictate how I should have felt. I honestly believed there must be some ‘right’ way to feel.

Instead it came out of left field and was shared with us in the calmest of fashions by an unorthodox doctor who had boycotted the tried and tested brilliance of banana lollies and doctor’s appointments outside of cricket practice. I was really sick but I didn’t comprehend the extent of my predicament. It was earth-shattering news of sickness and pain, both of which I had never lived or even heard about. I was still optimistic though, definitely hopeful. I could cope with one operation to make the headaches stop.

Brain surgery, anaesthetic and hospital were all words that were being thrown around that afternoon. Up until this moment I had never been close to anything like hospital before. I heard about hospital terms from shows like *A Country Practice* and *All Saints*. Someone would be given the disastrous news that they had to be operated on and through the dramatic build-up to the crescendo of surgery, emotion-charged relatives would bereave their loved one before they had even had their tonsils out...This was real life and this tragedy was being played out on my turf.

It was such a confusing time. My mind was racing but so much had changed it was hard to know what to focus on. My whole life was disintegrating. I was 12 and in my first year at high school. All the juicy elements of adolescence were

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beginning to rear up through the first year of my yet-to-be-lived, eight year freak train. Peer pressure, girls and alcohol were elements of my life, which served to bring some normality to my existence, like a teenager with teenage problems and not a kid with grown-up dilemmas. Funnily enough I wasn't scared and instead was strangely excited. I think partly because I didn't understand my predicament, partly because they also didn't fully understand its extent and also because I secretly thought to myself, 'time off school, niiiice!'

The adventure of boyhood was lost in that doctor's surgery... I would leave it a different person and would never return the same. Life and death issues had now interrupted my desire for adventure, my appetite to be the boy I was and still am - one who for years couldn't express himself. The life in me had no voice and the cancer just deafened my cry. I couldn't be my true self because of a brain tumour. I was muted from pouring out my true self and felt trapped.

There is much talk these days about forks in the road; pivotal moments in an individual's life which help define, shape and mould them into the person they grow to be. Sometimes our significant moments are obvious and sometimes we may need a hand in finding what circumstance or people helped make us into the people we are today. In my case it was 1994: I was 12 years old and my life totally changed forever.

Despite the dramatic jolt, my happiness seemed to escalate almost into joy. While my world was being turned upside down by failing health, something inside in the deep recesses of my soul, seemed to stir. I had a peace which enveloped

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me and felt separate from my experience. I didn't understand why. I was very happy and strangely optimistic despite the circumstances. Maybe it was my ignorance, possibly it was the exuberance of youth, but it seemed that something much larger was at play, which was the root cause of my optimism.