

Praise for *Blindsided*

“Mark Roser’s well-crafted book is beyond inspiring. It brought not only flowing tears, but a delight in seeing how God answered his deepest questions. Having lost our precious Kayla in an accident, I am also able to rejoice that God chooses young radiant souls like Ethan and my daughter to reach their generation for Christ. As Jesus said, ‘Truly, I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds’ (John 12:24). *Blindsided* will help you seize every opportunity—even the difficult ones—to spread Christ’s glorious gospel and reach ‘a thousand Ethans.’ ”

—**Julia Kay Duerler**, author of *She Had No Regrets*

“A searing and honest look at the pain and grief Mark Roser and his family experienced. Before the accident, Mark was known as a minister who wrote and taught on God’s sovereignty. One of the toughest theological questions we will ever face is the question of why there is evil and suffering. There is no sugar coating a father’s grief as he asks, ‘Why did God allow my son to die?’ and as he says, ‘Preaching it is a whole lot easier than living it!’
Roser is a modern Job.”

—**Dr. Gary Sweeten**, Founder, LifeWay Counseling Centers

“Roser’s beautiful, poignant book made me laugh and cry and feel deeply, not only for them in their loss, but coming to terms with that most haunting of questions about suffering, *Why, God?* It also helped me process my own experience of loss, forgiveness, and making sense of tragedy in life.”

—**Suzanne E. Shaw**, PsyD, MFT, Marriage and Family Therapist

“Having lost a beloved seventeen-year-old daughter in a tragic accident, we connected with Mark’s amazing book that describes the place where we ourselves lived, as he put into words the questions and feelings of every parent who loses a child. We have known Mark and Pat for more than twenty-five years, as Mark was our church’s inaugural mission guest speaker, and we have watched the Rosers live out their love for God when life hurts.”

—**Pastor Gary and Mary Trenum**,
Founders of Victory Christian Church, Kettering, Ohio

*To Ethan, Kayla, Andy, Terri, Joshua,
and “a thousand-thousand Ethans.”*

And to all those who mourn their death with the love that I texted Ethan:

**Praying that God will give you great wisdom,
confidence and strength.**

You are the Apple of his eye!

**He goes before you, follows after you,
and accompanies you each step of the way.**

I love you lots and lots!

MARK C. ROSER

Blindsided

**A Journey from Tragic Loss to
Triumphant Love**



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Blindsided: A Journey from Tragic Loss to Triumphant Love

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE <i>A DARK Weight</i>	7
• 1 • <i>A Knock AT the Door</i>	11
• 2 • <i>LEAVING Me?</i>	16
• 3 • <i>A NIGHTMARE CALL</i>	23
• 4 • <i>How Could This HAPPEN?</i>	28
• 5 • <i>ETHAN'S LAST DAYS</i>	36
• 6 • <i>A SIMILAR Question</i>	44
• 7 • <i>ETHAN'S Precious Body</i>	52
• 8 • <i>An Empty CHAIR</i>	59
• 9 • <i>LEAVING AFRICA</i>	66
• 10 • <i>An Ongoing INVESTIGATION</i>	74
• 11 • <i>Possible Answers</i>	80
• 12 • <i>My AMERICAN NIGHTMARE</i>	88
• 13 • <i>ETHAN'S Home Going</i>	96
• 14 • <i>Why Now?</i>	103
• 15 • <i>ETHAN'S BURIAL</i>	111
• 16 • <i>WHAT Do I Do Now?</i>	118
• 17 • <i>“Not PAYING Attention”</i>	124
• 18 • <i>God Grieves</i>	133
• 19 • <i>A CHAPEL Service</i>	142
• 20 • <i>Why AND How?</i>	151
• 21 • <i>Surrounded by MOUNTAINS</i>	159
• 22 • <i>My DARKNESS into Light</i>	166
• 23 • <i>Tell Me of Your Love</i>	174
• 24 • <i>You HAVE Answered Me</i>	181

• 25 • <i>A Full Circle</i>	189
• 26 • <i>Be Bold AND Go All In</i>	197
• 27 • <i>My Letter to ETHAN</i>	206
EPILOGUE	215
POSTSCRIPT <i>Thirty Points of Comfort</i>	217
THE FINAL WORD	252
NOTES	253
PERMISSIONS	254

PROLOGUE

A DARK Weight

.....
“I have a place in God’s plan.”
.....

A COLD GUST OF AIR blows into my office, sending a paper gliding to the floor. Reaching over my desk, I shut the window with a thud and place a paperweight on the stack of papers that document my catastrophe. I lift the paperweight a second time—it’s about four pounds—far less than the sixteen-pound weight that broke my heart.

I still can’t believe it happened!

Slumping back into my leather chair, I roll forward to my desk and wake my PC. The screen reads: “April 29, 2:32 a.m.” I resist the urge to go online and read more articles about it. The newspapers offer no answer to my question.

The house is so quiet I hear myself sigh. Then, as if from an adjacent bedroom, the sound of Ethan’s voice plays in my head.

“Bottle,” I hear him call as if were yesterday, rather than years ago. Pat nicknamed him Baa Lamb, because his infant voice sounded like a wee lamb’s, and when he woke at 5:30 a.m. he loved to sip warm

milk out of his bottle. A year and a half old, he kept calling out; his initially pleasant requests increased in volume and pitch every couple of minutes he waited. “Bottle . . . Bottle . . . BOTTLE!” When at last the warm milk arrived, he always said, “Tanku.”

“Daddy,” I imagine him say. Oh, I’d like to think “Daddy” was his first word, but growing up in Zimbabwe with an African nanny—was Ethan’s first word even in English?

“Baba.” Yes, that’s it. He called me Baba, meaning “father” in the Shona language. Often, I heard his voice saying, ever so sweetly, “Baba, I love you!”

Ethan was ten years old when we returned to America, and he loved soccer, Africa’s favorite sport. His first soccer team in America was Orange Crush. As the ball went up and down the field, he was always in the middle of the cloud of dusty boys. Teasing him, I said with a rough accent, “Your African name is, ‘Eka Boom Ba,’ meaning he who strikes the round thing.” He laughed, and I encouraged him to play for God’s glory. Before one game, I suggested, “Let’s pray you get a goal today.”

“I can get goals without praying,” Ethan replied.

“Well, I know you can, but could there be reasons why we’d ask?”

“So we don’t get cocky!” he said, giggling.

That day he had two goals, the first one on a lucky bounce. After that, he always wanted me to pray. Ethan’s dream was to play professional soccer, and he pursued it with a passion. As a sophomore, he played varsity at Mason High School and helped his team go undefeated. They were ranked number one in America. His club team, Cincinnati United Premier (CUP), was also a top team in America. Playing in weekend tournaments became a staple of life for him, and it kept me busy as the years ticked away like the final minutes of a competitive game.

But tonight, the minutes seem eternal as if time has stopped and the game is over.

That first summer after we came back from Africa, a church up the road had a Vacation Bible School. More than a hundred kids attended,

and Ethan loved going. The week ended with an ice cream evening with the parents. Everybody knew Ethan, the boy from Africa, who won the award for quoting more Bible verses than any kid. Then, in his junior year of high school, a greater love than soccer completely captured his heart. At church Ethan reported on Frontier Ranch:

As cliché as it is, my week at Frontier Ranch was one of the best weeks of my life. Most people feel this way because Frontier is usually the place where they start their relationship with Jesus. But the reasons I'll remember that week are very different. At camp I had time to be still and to bask in the authority of God and focus on His almighty plan. I have a place in God's plan. At camp, I realized I have one last chance to impact my 4,000 friends at Mason High School. But I'm not a preacher. I'm just Ethan. I'm that kid in your math class. But I want to bring the presence of Jesus to my classmates because they need the Lord.

Well, son, you certainly found a way to do that, and as I glance at your picture on my desk, I realize I should've known years ago your life would not be normal. I should have recorded more of what you said.

The silent house and his lingering voice in the house summon me,
Write while it's all still fresh in your mind.

I open a blank document, flexing my shoulders on the back of my office chair, then stretching my arms above my head, I ask, "Where does one begin?"

"Dad, you need a good hook!" Last summer Ethan had read a draft of *My African Dream* and said, "Start with your long drive from South Africa through Matabeleland at night, where the dissidents were roaming the bush with AK-47 rifles!" Many times, Ethan's insights and words left me spellbound. Often, I joked with him, "One day I will write a book on the sayings of Ethan." He gave me his "Oh, really!" look.

The dreadful irony of it—Pat and I happily wrote our memoirs, titled *My African Dream*, and now in sorrow I could write *My American Nightmare*.

Looking at that ugly round paperweight next to his picture on my desk, I imagine it flying in the air. Swiftly, it strikes the stack of papers, tearing into them like a hungry cacodemon. It scatters fragments, floating in the air all around me, and my feelings, sharp as rotating sawblades, swirl about me, cutting away at my flesh, ever more deeply.

Oh, God, I wish to die!

Taking a deep breath, I shut down my PC. But I can't stop the sense that I'm left to slowly bleed out. And a rage rises within me against the darkness, for though I'm surrounded on three sides by shelves full of thick books on theology, I can't stop asking God one question: "WHY?"

A Knock AT the Door

(A WEEK A GO)

.....
ETHAN'S TWEET: "*The lady at Chipotle sneaks me
three scoops of chicken. I'm about to hibernate.
Life is good.*"
.....

ENTERING THE KITCHEN from the garage, I catch a whiff of last night's burnt popcorn. Pat sits at the island with a bowl of salad and forks a piece of lettuce. I swing the microwave door shut.

"We'll have Ethan's room carpeted by the time he's home for the summer."

"Are you hungry?" she asks, looking over at me.

"Just thirsty," I reply, and I grab a bottle of tea from the fridge. "Fred's guys did a nice job laying the floor. Far better than I could've done. You know, I think it looks like real wood."

"Sort of—I'm not crazy about it," and her fork goes hunting again. "I would've liked to see it in a browner shade."

It took two trips to Floor and Décor in my Ford Ranger to transport that flooring. I took it all back when I couldn't install it properly. Then, I had to buy and transport it all a secondtime.

"Well, it's a little late for that now," and I pop open my drink.

"When does Ethan get home?" Pat asks.

"He'll be here in three weeks."

"I miss him being in the house."

"Yeah, you pour yourself into your kids, and they leave you for college and get married."

We have had a wedding two years running. Our oldest, Johnathan, married first, and then Nathan got married six months ago. Elesha has her own house, and Ethan is now at college.

"Well, that's how it's meant to be," Pat says, as she takes her bowl to the sink.

Well, I still have Pat. My brown-eyed, brunette beauty always gives me another perspective. Adventuresome and intelligent, ever active, she has aged like fine wine. Having turned sixty last month, she maintains an attractive figure. I imagine that's because of all the salads she eats.

"You want to watch a movie together?" I ask.

"Let's watch one in about thirty minutes," she says, and she loads the dishwasher.

When the kids were home, weekends meant candy and a movie. Lord knows, I need a quiet Saturday after another full week of finishing our lower level, and down the steps I go to our basement and maneuver around a pile of baseboards. Before Ethan left for college, my boy and I did the stud walls for his new bedroom and his own bathroom. We got good at hammering nails into the two-by-fours, but in the process the hammers sometimes found our thumbs. I said, "I know why construction workers cuss more than accountants." We laughed.

Sipping cold tea, I savor the thought that Ethan will soon be home for the summer, and I wonder, is he eating right now, studying, or training? I'm sure he's using his time well. His high school coach,

Paul Reedy, wrote in his recommendation for Ethan, that in twenty-five years of coaching, he never had a player with a stronger work ethic than Ethan. With school and club soccer, Ethan still maintained a 3.6 GPA.

We are new empty nesters, and I don't like it. We did, however, effectively transition our four children from Zimbabwe to America, this wonderful land of opportunity, and now with the youngest off to college, it is easy for Pat and me to travel overseas. As I walk backup the steps, my knees remind me that I'm climbing the hill to age sixty this year, or maybe it's the months of doing renovations, or maybe it's Daylight Savings? We never had that in Africa. Whatever it is, I'm finished for the day even though it's only five p.m.

One last thing I'll do—a church in Texas needs more copies of my book *God's Sovereignty*: “Do bad things just happen to people? Are thorns dealt out like a deck of cards?” Questions on the book's back stare at me. Written during the long crisis in Zimbabwe, my book has helped people face hard times. The Bible teaches that God rules over every detail of our lives. There is nothing outside his control. We can trust him no matter what. For some reason, the bigger theological questions attract me. But writing on complex themes is time consuming, and my itinerating and doing mission trips keep me busy.

I finish packing the final copy in a box to mail on Monday and head for the shower.

The hot water soothes my shoulders.

Ten minutes later in bed, I'm surfing a handful of local TV stations. Pat joins me, sitting on the bedspread. We watch a story about a tight-knit Armenian family in Turkey, three generations living under one roof. Religious persecution, however, separates the father and son. Flashbacks of happier childhood days in Istanbul, rolling flat bread and playing with the girl next door. The story moves slowly as Middle Eastern music fades out again. . . .

“Someone is knocking at the door. Will you get it?” Pat asks.

I didn't even hear them knocking. I jump into my tracksuit and stride through the hall. Outside the dining room window, I see a police cruiser sitting in our driveway.

What is this about? Only once before did the police come to our house—when I was the victim of Identity Theft. I hurry to open the door. A well-built officer stands in the entrance.

“Are you Ethan Roser’s father?” he asks in a serious tone.

“Yes.” My heart races.

“Your son has been in an accident.”

“Is he hurt?”

“I don’t know,” and he shakes his head. “Call this officer in Chicago,” and he hands me a slip of paper.

My God, what’s happening? Please don’t let Ethan be hurt badly.

I picture his Cavalier smashed on a busy expressway and him in an ambulance, being raced to a local hospital. In the pit of my stomach, I feel sick. Looking at the officer, I don’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry,” the officer says in a soft voice, and then he turns and leaves.

Gripping the slip of paper, I run back to the bedroom. “Ethan has been in an accident!”

Pat frantically reaches for her cell phone on her nightstand.

“I missed a call,” she says, struggling to breathe, “with a Chicago area code!” Her hands shaking, she presses her phone to call the number.

Everything is moving too fast. I’m exploding. I can’t be still. Rushing to my office with the slip of paper the officer gave me, I dial the number on my Captel phone. A voice mail answers.

“I’m Ethan’s father.” Balancing myself with a hand on my desk, I press the phone to my mouth. “Is my son hurt bad? Please phone me now!”

Putting the phone back on the receiver, my body tenses. I abruptly recall a nightmare I had of Ethan leaving me. It surges to the front of my mind, and all the horror hits me of the dreaded words spoken in my nightmare: “He’s leaving you for eternity.”

“Oh, God,” I shout, “You’re not taking my son from me—are you? No, don’t!”

Terror encircles me, and I pace between the living room and the hallway, screaming, “No, God, no! Please NO! PLEASE don’t take my son from me!”

· 2 ·

LEAVING Me?

(TEN MONTHS EARLIER)

.....
“I’m never going to let you die!”
.....

“WE DID THIS!” Ethan says, standing on the driveway pad with boxes around us. There’s a *wow!* in his voice as he looks at the gravel beneath us.

He and I had built a thirty-five-foot-long retaining wall and with forty tons of gravel filled in the sloping mound where he stands; strenuous work, but we doubled our parking area.

Elesha comes down the driveway in her black Jeep Compass and pulls to a stop next to a couple of large packed boxes. We quickly put them in her hatchback. Ethan then climbs inside Elesha’s back seat, holding his pillow like we’re heading out of town for a weekend of soccer games. But today our boy is headed out of the nest, bound for Dallas Baptist University.

I hop into Ethan’s car to drive it while he sleeps. Branded by dents on both sides, his 2001 silver Chevy Cavalier had been my mom’s

car. She put the bigger dent on the driver's side before she stopped driving, and the other door got banged at a Young Life meeting. "Let's not make them pay," Ethan had said, and we left it dented. He didn't care how it looked, and for me it was all about what was under the hood, an engine with plenty of life. As I start the engine, the odometer now reads a mere 42,211 miles. Next to me, the passenger seat holds a laundry basket filled with Ethan's shoes, placed on top of a box of books. His back seat is crammed with more boxes and a black suitcase. On top of the suitcase are piles of colorful shirts on white plastic hangers, spread out like freshly cut flowers.

Elesha pulls out of the driveway. I follow her, convoy style. The old Chevy gobbles up the miles, like my mom, age ninety-two. I envision this car lasting Ethan all four of his years in Dallas.

We arrive in D-town to a sizzling heat, 103 degrees, and in our hotel room, we crank up the air conditioning. That evening, we watch the Rangers play baseball. A thunderstorm rolls in and breaks up the heat and the game, but we add another park to our resume. Two summers ago, Ethan and I began visiting baseball parks around the country. We made trips to Wrigley Field, PNC Park, Busch Stadium, and Great American Park.

The next day, we move Ethan's stuff into his dorm room, and then it hits me—we must say goodbye. Ethan and Elesha look surprised. I must tell them why I'm crying, and I hurry into the room.

"Remember our overnight train ride from Johannesburg to Cape Town? Ethan, you were six and so excited when we arrived. You called me over and stood on a chair. 'Look,' you said, peering into my eyes. 'I'm taller than you.' Then you said, 'I'm never going to forget you. I'm never going to let you die,' and you gave me the sweetest kiss."

Elesha's eyes moisten, and she puts her arm around me. Ethan is quiet, his face thoughtful as he absorbs the moment like a tree whose roots are often saturated by good rains.

The next day, Elesha and I leave Ethan in Dallas and drive back to Cincinnati.

The summer before Ethan left for college, I explained to him that when the youngest leaves home, parents feel the loss more intensely because it marks the end of an era for them. I said, in jest, “You’ll have to hang around the house longer than your siblings.” He looked at me, knowingly, pleased that I had cloaked my deep feelings in a playful way lest I make him sad when he needed to be excited about all the opportunities ahead of him.

Since we are a tight-knit family and have lived away from relatives for many years, I particularly feel the loss of Ethan’s presence in the house, because for the past five years, I’ve spent oodles of time with him. My life is bound up with his life as tightly as a knot.

Back home in Cincinnati, Pat and I Skype with Ethan, and we talk about his growing desire to transfer to Wheaton College. Then we just look at one another and smile, Pat and I, lying in our bed in Loveland and Ethan lying on the top of a bunk bed in Dallas.

“We are going to come down and watch you play,” I say, and we sign off.

October in Dallas, Ethan picks us up at the airport in his Cavalier, talking and driving, happy to see Mom and Dad. It’s been three months, our longest separation ever.

We go to a real Texas barbeque restaurant where his team recently ate. We sit in a wooden booth. Plates of ribs and sides of mashed potatoes and green beans arrive at our table. I’ve always enjoyed giving Ethan food. After soccer practice, I’d heat up his dinner, and we’d sit and talk while he ate. It was at one dinner during his junior year when he told me, “I want to be a minister.”

As Ethan eats a rib, that conversation replays itself in my mind: “I thought God gifted me to play soccer, but I see he’s given me other gifts. I understand the Bible, and I can articulate it and make connections between passages that genuinely excite me.” “There are other vocations

besides ministry that honor God,” Pat pointed out. “I know,” replied Ethan, “but I have a passion for it, and serving God is the only thing that I could do that would have a lasting effect.”

Now here he is at DBU, studying for the ministry and playing soccer.

Ethan finishes a slab and takes a napkin with one hand and goes for his drink with the other. I reckon it’s time to talk again about his desire to transfer to Wheaton.

“Maybe you should finish your freshman year here, because of your scholarship money.”

“Wheaton offers a two-thousand-dollar scholarship.” Ethan looks over at me. “It’s for interns who do summer ministry.” He then focuses on his mashed potatoes.

“That helps, but Wheaton is far more expensive.”

“I wrote to the Vineyard and Crossroads about summer internships, but I haven’t heard anything back yet. But four years of internships would be eight thousand dollars.” There’s a twinkle in his eyes.

“Well, for your summer internship, you could promote our book at churches,” I suggest.

“Ethan, I can see you talking about your years in Africa. You’d be good at it!” Pat says.

People are naturally attracted to Ethan. He’s 160 pounds of muscle in sculpted calves, thighs, and a six-pack abdomen. His narrow upper body rests on a five-foot-ten Italian frame. His head is topped off with brown wavy hair, cut short on the sides, atop a handsome Irish face. His skin is clear with a few faint freckles. He also features a friendly smile and unforgettable hazel brown eyes that dance in celebration of life.

“Ethan, forget college. I could train you myself. We’d travel and you’d read books on theology.” I smile. “Then you wouldn’t have any debt at all.”

I’ve talked to Ethan before about taking over our homegrown mission.

As he processes my semi-serious proposition about hands-on training, his eyebrows rise, then his facial muscles crinkle, and he chuckles hard. A family two booths away smiles over at us. His laugh is the contagious type that makes you laugh too, even if you have no idea what he's laughing about. In his high school yearbook, he was voted the one with the best laugh.

“Dad, I want to play soccer! But I'll help you with the mission work after I graduate. I'm talking with the coach at Wheaton. Here's an email I plan to send him. Tell me what you think.”

Ethan hands me his phone, and he goes for the soft-serve ice cream machine.

Coach, I've really been praying and seeking guidance from God and my family on what I should do. I don't want to make the mistake of just leaving DBU based on my own judgment and emotions and it not be God's will. But I feel in my spirit that it was right for me to pursue Wheaton. None of us can truly understand the complexity of what God is doing in our lives, although sometimes I think we all wish we could take a quick glance at His cheat sheet.

“I think it's a good email,” I say to Ethan as he returns with a bowl of ice cream.

Also, I think he's got me on board, and I'll be helping him transfer. At least, he'll be closer to home—four, not twelve hours away. When we drop Ethan off at his dorm, it is no wonder he wants to transfer. The parking lot is empty. The campus looks like a ghost town since most of the students are from the Dallas area and go home for the weekend. Ethan longs for community, and before our week with him is over, he tells his DBU coach that he plans on transferring to Wheaton College.

IN JANUARY 2017, I drive Ethan to Wheaton. The campus occupies several streets with lots of green space and many mature trees. We slowly drive past Wheaton's football stadium and stop at their soccer stadium. I imagine I'll watch Ethan play many games here. Several buildings have a historical feel, and the date 1860, the college's first year, catches my eye. At Fischer Hall, I proudly help him move his things into his dorm room on the second floor.

Inside the student recreational building, a special mission display features former Wheaton graduates Jim Elliot and Nate Saint, missionaries who were martyred in Ecuador for their faith.

We shoot a game of pool and decide to go for a bite to eat. It's cold in Chicago. Compared to Dallas, it's frigid. But Ethan says he'll get used to it. He's a third culture kid (TCK). That's what sociologists call kids who spent their formative years away from their parents' homeland. Third culture kids cope better with change and are unusually accepting of others who are different. Ethan has also avoided the downside of being a TCK, since he spent ten years in one place, instead of moving to a new place every couple of years.

After two days together, Ethan is waiting in his car while I board a Greyhound. My bus pulls away, and minutes later, he phones.

"Dad, I really appreciate you bringing me. It was really good of you." The following day, he texts me: **"The number of theology classes is incredible! There are so many interesting ones. They even have classes where you just examine David's life."**

"You will love that. I know God had you transfer to Wheaton. I'm excited for you!"

A month later, in February, I make sure to spend a night in Chicago before my connecting flight to Nepal. Ethan and I have dinner. I can see he's happier. He drops me off at my hotel, and I watch him turn his car around as we wave at one another a couple of times. Then he pulls onto the street, out of my sight. I think I'll be spending a lot of time in Chicago, flying overseas for mission trips out of O'Hare rather than JFK.

Back from my trip to Nepal, I have odd experiences waking up. Over a two-week period in March, I repeatedly have these disturbing thoughts drifting through my mind right as I awaken: *I have four children, not three. I speak their names, "Johnathan, Elesha, Nathan, and Ethan."* And I assure myself that's four, not three. The naming and counting of my children as I regain consciousness happens on a handful of occasions. Strange and unsettling. Why would anyone wonder how many children they have? I've had thoughts float through my mind before as I woke up, but never this clear and never the same thoughts repeating themselves.

Two weeks later, I wake up from a nightmare. In it, Ethan says, "I'm leaving you." "Why are you leaving me?" I ask. Before I get an answer, I plead in terror, "Please don't leave me!" Then in my dream I hear these words come from beyond Ethan: "He's leaving you for eternity." The words strike me with a terrible finality, and I struggle against awful feelings of emptiness.

Once fully awake, I raise myself up on my elbow. Whatever that was, a nightmare or a shadowy demon, it struck my heart with enormous alarm. *What's wrong with me that I'd have a dream like that?* Is that how I feel about Ethan leaving for college?

When the older kids went to college, Pat and I couldn't see them for months at a time. Maybe the trauma of past separations has caught up with me now that the last one is at college.

It's April 15, 2017, and I pray for my children by name as I do every morning. I ask God to protect them and fulfill his plans for their lives, and I take my mind off that nightmare.

