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AFTER THE ACCIDENT

Before The First Visit

I am compiling mental images of my father since he was hit by a car on Monday. They are composites of the information my mother is telling me, and now there are three. They are distinct, and they keep repeating in my mind. Each one leaves me feeling helpless and heartbroken, both of which I am.

The first is of the impact itself, and it is cartoon-like, flat. It haunted me Monday night after my mother called, and kept me from sleeping. They had been walking in the crosswalk of the parking lot of the hospital where my father takes an exercise class, when a car, moving fairly slowly, just didn't stop. It was driven by a woman in her 80s, not much older than my father, come to think of it, though my father lost the confidence to drive several years ago already. My mother told me she was so angry that she threw her gloves at the woman's car and yelled, "Didn't you see us?" She had, the woman stumbled her reply, but she thought they were further away.

My father was knocked down. He hit his head on the pavement and his leg was badly broken. He lay on the ground, my mother told me, shouting, "I can't move my leg! I can't move my leg!" Later, he kept asking her whether it was his fault, and what had he done wrong.

The moment of my image is of my father falling. The car isn't visible; it's just my father sort of rolling on the ground just inches from the curb of the sidewalk. He's wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt tucked into darker blue trousers, and his graying hair is combed neatly back over his head. He has no coat, and in my mind, his brows are furrowed and his face holds the

worried look he has when he's displeased or angry, or about to complain. He is flat, two-dimensional, and I'm seeing him from the side. His back is rounded, his shoulders hunched forward, his knees bent and brought up, so he almost forms a half-circle. He stays rigid in that position as he falls. If he fell backward, he might actually rock back and forth on his spine. When he hits the ground, he is on his side, his body held firm in the same position.

My second image comes from the next day, when my mother tells me about the night and the following morning awaiting surgery. I can only imagine how drugged he must be, waiting all that time with a broken leg. "He's only semi-conscious," my mother says, but I don't know what that means. Then she adds the information that forms my second vision of my father. "He's been acting kind of weird," she says, downplaying the way she does any extra concern but obviously disturbed nonetheless. "He keeps saying it's too hot and trying to take off his clothes. I tell him, 'Don't do that. Don't do that.'" So I picture my father now lying on his back in a hospital bed, rails along the edges, wearing a light blue hospital gown now untied in the back. He has pushed the thin but ironed white sheet and some overly used, pillowed wool blankets to the bottom of the bed, and he keeps tearing at his gown, pulling it away from his naked body underneath. His head is thrown back, his chin pointing towards the ceiling, his skin a little shiny and pinker than usual. The word that best describes the way I see his face is 'anguished'. If I were there, he wouldn't even know it.

My third picture is from after the surgery, and it includes sound. He is in a private room now in the pulmonary ICU so they can keep a close watch on him for a few days. I couldn't speak to him yesterday because he was still blurry from anesthesia and trauma. It seems I can't speak to him today either. "He's still kind of out of it," says my mother. When I press her, she tells me he's having trouble breathing because of congestion accumulated in his lungs from the anesthesia, "which," she adds, "is to be expected." He is uncomfortable, she says. Then I can hear it in the background, a sawing sound, breathing as if it were being spoken as well as breathed, in out in

out with little bubbles of phlegm making popping sounds along the way. It goes on and on. “He’s trying to cough something up but nothing is coming,” explains my mother. What I picture now is my father in about the same position in his bed, still on his back, still wearing the blue gown. The bed has been remade, and the sheet and blanket are undisturbed over his chest. There are tubes now; he’s having a blood transfusion and there must be some kind of IV to feed him. His head is still looking back, his brow still furrowed as he breathes out loud. The sound holds his voice in it; it couldn’t be anyone else’s breathing, and I can imagine him talking to me using the same tone. Only now it’s the most of him that can be expressed, the need to clear his chest.

I see these images within the first 20 seconds of waking up in the morning. At first it’s just an uneasy feeling, then my pictures rush in and with them the high-strung queasiness that stays with me all day. I carry them with me, waiting to hear if there’s been any change, if he’s getting any more comfortable, any more like himself. I rely on them as my only connection to what’s going on there before I travel this weekend to visit, snapshots like the ones you’re shown after someone else’s vacation. I see the accident and the hospital, and I recognize that this will not be an easy recuperation.

It is only briefly, however, a few times each day, that I allow myself to feel the emotions that are attached to my pictures. Then it’s like a wind whooshing through my chest, emptying it with a great force, then ushering in powerful combinations of anger, pity, sadness and fear that make me have to sit down. Then my three images come back, all vibrant with these emotions, and I’m filled with what I keep wanting to call ‘dismay’. Some say, “These things happen.” Others express their temporary horror and offer their sympathies. I just seem to go about my daily business, overcome with all the terrible parts of my father’s accident in those moments when I feel them, and otherwise just flipping through my pictures and shaking my head.

The First Visit

I finally make my way to the ICU on Saturday morning, where my mother and two brothers await me. By now my father’s condition has

deteriorated from a broken leg to a fat embolism that has traveled to his lungs and caused respiratory failure. Overnight, he has been intubated and sedated. When I see him, I realize that though his condition has become more complicated, my images weren’t far from reality. His hospital gown is blue and white, and there is an ironed sheet covering him, pushed down to his waist. He is on his back, his head tilted slightly upward; his eyes are closed, but his eyebrows angle down towards his nose every now and then in some expression of discomfort. I am afraid he is having bad dreams, the way he seems to struggle in his drug-induced sleep.

It’s the medical instruments I hadn’t thought to picture. Every part of his body seems to be invaded. There are tubes everywhere, some carrying drugs and nutrition in, others delivering waste out. The biggest is the respirator that is fed down his throat and is now breathing for him, held in place by white tape wrapped several times around his head under his nose. The skin of his cheeks and neck bulges slightly under the tightness of the tape, and I worry for a moment until I realize that in the scheme of things now it hardly matters. His feet are encased in oversized pink foam rubber “booties,” they call them, through which electrical current is sent to stimulate his blood flow. His wrists are restrained so he won’t unwittingly hurt himself in an urge to yank free. You almost forget that his leg is in a cast.

What strikes me first, though, is how small he seems and how still he’s lying. Although he’s sedated and can’t talk, we’re told he can hear us and register what we’re saying. Still, I feel awkward, unsure of what to say. “Hi, Dad,” I begin, “it’s me, Sue.” My words sound stilted but now they’re all I have. I stroke his hair, smoothing it away from his forehead. His scalp feels greasy and rough, but the skin on his face is remarkably smooth. There is dried mucus on the side of his nose, and gathered in the corners of his eyes. Suddenly I think of his mother, my grandmother, and wonder if he longs for her now.

I talk for less than a minute, it seems, not long enough, I berate myself, thinking fast for more to say. “We’re here with you,” I tell him. “We love you.” I stand by him a while longer in silence, still stroking, studying his face, the whiskers that have emerged around his chin, the yellow stain of Betadine that has dripped down his neck, the whiteness of his shoulders that I haven’t seen for years. When I talk to him, I’m afraid my voice will betray the fear and sadness that are filling me.

I look over at my mother, who is bolstered by her children’s presence.