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Velvet. Face. Red. Church.

Jessie Carson

“Velvet. Face. Red. Church,” the doctor says, looking my dad in the eye.

Dad nods. “Okay,” he says, as she continues to take his blood pressure and check the thiamine level in the bag swinging on the IV stand.

“Where are my phones?” Dad asks, patting the front pocket of his hospital gown. He’s a manager for an oil company in Alberta, and even when he was home in Ottawa between his fourteen-day rotations, he almost never put his work phone down.

“They’re at home,” I say, then lower my voice. “We don’t really want anything valuable lying around here.”

“Oh yeah, yeah,” he agrees.

“So, you know who she is?” the doctor is still looking at my dad but tilts her head toward me.

“My daughter, Jessie,” Dad answers. The first time a doctor asked him that question, I almost laughed.

“What type of engineer are you?” the doctor asks, glancing at the iron ring on my dad’s little finger.

“Chemical,” he answers.

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She nods while making notes on the clipboard. “What did they serve for lunch today?”

“Just the usual stuff,” Dad answers.

“Okay,” she smiles. This is the first time we’ve seen this doctor, and although she’s asking many of the same questions that the other four asked, I’m hoping she sees something the rest of them didn’t. Since he’s been in the hospital, Dad’s case has resembled one that could be seen on an episode of *House* or a story by Oliver Sacks. We had one of the doctors tell us that.

Continuing her questions, she asks, “Do you know how long you’ve been in the hospital?”

Dad thinks for a second. “A couple days?” he says.

The words hang in the air and I’m unable to understand them, because to me, the last eighteen days are all that have existed.

“We’ve been here about two and a half weeks,” I tell him. Dad raises his eyebrows. Now, he’s trying to grasp my words.

The doctor is writing on Dad’s chart and I am staring across the room at a man in another bed.

That man had a stroke. I used to be grateful that my dad didn't.

Dad breaks the silence and asks where I'm living now.

"I live with you and Mom. Shamus and I moved in a year ago." I look down at my hands because we already went over this twice today and I don't want to see that he still doesn't remember.

"Oh good." He pauses. "How old is Shamus?"

"Eighteen months," I answer, and he gets a—now familiar—surprised look on his face and asks where my sister, Kelly, lives.

"Halifax," I answer.

"Does she know I'm in here?" he asks.

"She just went to the cafeteria with Mom."

Quickly, I add, "But she was only here for a short time." Before he asks, I tell him my brother lives in Ottawa.

Dad looks at the hospital emblem on the whiteboard hanging on the wall. "That's where we are right now, right?"

"Yup," I answer and assume this means he can still read.

It was almost three weeks ago when Dad called Mom from his work camp and told her he didn't remember the day before. Mom came upstairs to my room. Shaking, she told me what he had said, while she looked to the floor, weighing each word that came out of her mouth. I put my arms around her and asked her questions she couldn't answer. After I let go, I grabbed the phone from her hand

and called Dad back. He picked up while he was waiting in the on-site clinic.

“Dad, tell them you might be having a stroke!” I yelled at him.

“Jess, calm down,” he said.

“Let me talk to them!” I insisted, thinking that if he could just get himself to a hospital, someone would know what to do.

Dad said, “I’ve got this under control, Jess. Don’t worry.” While I continued to demand to talk to the nurse, he hung up the phone. I didn’t believe him, because he’s never had to say he was in control. He just was. And he would never have hung up the phone on me.

A coworker drove Dad from site to the hospital in town where he waited for three hours, did blood and urine tests, and was sent back to work with a suggestion that he get an MRI at some point. Dad sent five texts telling my mom that he was given the okay to go back to work. But the texts all came within ten minutes. We knew we had to get him to the hospital back home.

Two days later, after we were finally able to arrange his flight home, he was admitted to the hospital within five minutes of walking through the emergency room doors. They took him in based on one question: What day is it? He said, “Sometime in the winter?”

The doctor looks at my dad. “Okay, Mr. Carson, can you tell me the four words I told you to remember?”

Not two minutes have passed. Dad looks at me. I open my mouth to say that I can't tell him but close my lips and turn them into a patient smile, even though my chest is hardening. If there is such a thing as telepathy, I hope to master it as I try to mentally fling the words into his head. *Velvet. Face. Red. Church.* All I'm really doing is leaning closer and closer toward him until I catch myself and sink back in my chair, dropping the expectant look on my face. *Please know them,* I think.

"Four words," he says and looks down. *Please, at least one.* Dad looks back up. "I don't know," he answers. My mouth opens again and I want to reassure Dad that *I* barely remember the words but he's done this test almost every day since he's been here and he has yet to remember one.

"Okay," the doctor says, "no problem." She gives him a hint, saying the third word is a color. Dad answers, blue. Word by word, she gives him hints. And one by one, he gets them wrong.

"You'll be pretty tired today, Mr. Carson. Dr. Campbell will be in on Monday." The doctor smiles and starts toward the door.

"Wait!" I call and follow her out to the hall. "Have the results come back yet?"

"Oh," the doctor says surprised, "I thought you were told."

"What?" I say sharply.

"Everything came back normal."

This means that no virus could be found in his system, at least no strain for which a test exists. No autoimmune disease could be detected, at least

none that are known. He doesn't have syphilis, rabies, or meningitis. He almost certainly doesn't have a tumor or cancer and it is possible that he is not having seizures. Dad has no headaches, no pain, no dizziness, and is not slurring his words. The memory loss literally happened overnight. The previous day, he was senior manager overseeing a team of ten people. The next morning, he doesn't remember who most of them are.

“What other tests are going to be done?” I ask, already knowing that they've done every test they know how to do. The only unusual result was the MRI. Abnormalities, indicating an inflammation called encephalitis, on his limbic temporal lobes show on the scan like paint splattered on his brain. His remembering is spotty, reflecting the MRI image, with the most affected years being the twenty most recent. Dad doesn't seem overly upset by this, even though he was emotional during the first week in the hospital, crying every time he saw us. Maybe that was when he still knew what he was losing, felt his memories disappear.

“We'll be having a meeting before he's discharged to decide how we move forward. Be prepared that sometimes we never find a diagnosis. We're still learning so much about the brain,” she answers.

“How can he lose ten solid years of memory overnight?” My voice is shaking now.

I can tell she wishes she could answer, but without saying anything, she reaches out and squeezes my arm.

When I return to Dad's room, he says to me, "I know I'm missing some information."

"Yup, we don't know why yet. But we know it's not a stroke," I say, because I know this is his next question. He looks at me to see if I'm hiding anything and I look in my purse and collect things that I can throw out: gum wrappers, receipts, old grocery lists.

I close my eyes and don't ever want to open them. There are times when you want life to speed up. Or slow down. Right now, I don't want any of it to exist. I don't want to go forward or backward because I don't know if this is going to get better or worse.

"Where are my phones?" Dad asks.

Reluctantly, I open my eyes. "At home. We aren't supposed keep valuables here." He agrees that's a good idea.

"You want to go for a walk?" I ask. "We could go see Tara?" I can see he doesn't remember. "She just had a baby. Her second one. After Declan. Who's two years old now."

All of this is new to him, so I continue. "And she's on the second floor." It just happens that my cousin gave birth yesterday in the same wing of the hospital. Aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins have been visiting for the last couple days to both the maternity and neurology ward.

“What do I have again?” Dad asks.

“We don’t know yet, but they’re still doing tests. It’s not a stroke though,” I say, almost driving myself crazy.

“Is it contagious?” Dad asks.

“It’s highly unlikely,” I say. There was some talk about a virus that attacked the wrong part of him, his brain. But even if it had, the virus would only present as a cold or a canker sore in someone else.

“Well,” Dad says assertively, “I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable if it’s still unknown. We probably shouldn’t go down.”

Dad can’t remember what city he lives in or what company he works for, but he still has the ability to add, subtract, be humorous, and think of others first.

“Okay,” I say, “let’s just get out of the room.”

“Sure.” He stands and I help him maneuver the IV stand out of the room. He hangs on to it with one hand and we pad down the hall silently. I walk slightly behind him and get anxious about all the hard surfaces: the linoleum floor, the painted cinder block walls, the metal racks filled with medical supplies. Keeping an eye on his head and his pace, I start to strategize in case Dad trips or explodes. Both seem equally possible.

“So, Tara and her boyfriend got married?” Dad says.

“Yup,” I say about my cousin who married her husband ten years ago. Dad seems to remember bits and pieces.

“Well, that’s a great addition to the family. Good for them,” Dad responds, as if hearing about the nuptials for the first time.

The piece Dad doesn't remember is that Tara found out her husband was cheating on her while she was pregnant with their second baby, the one she just gave birth to in the hospital. At least someone in the family still believes in happily ever after.

"Yup," I say.

We reach the freight elevators at the end of the hall, stop, turn around, and start walking back.

When we approach his room, I almost let us walk past it to see if he remembers.

"It's this one," I say and steer him toward the doorway.

"Oh yeah," he says in the way that tells me he's faking it, a mannerism that is completely new.

We re-enter the room, which no longer feels safe to me like the way it felt when we first arrived eighteen days ago. I am slow and careful to take my seat, as if the chair will spill on the floor like sand. We keep waiting. I flip through a magazine that has lots of pictures of people wearing too much makeup. I run my palm over the page and it's like my sense of touch is heightened. Like I've never touched a smooth, glossy piece of paper before, at least not in this lifetime. I wonder if we're living during the wrong era. If future doctors will have a diagnosis or a treatment or a cure.

I ask Dad how it feels to lose these memories. I want to know if he's sad right now. He says simply that he knows he's forgotten but he doesn't know what he's forgotten. I take this to mean that he feels like there was something he should've written

down but doesn't remember what it was. This is as close as I come to understanding.

We wait more.

"Are you okay?" I've already asked him this several times today.

"I'm good," Dad says. "It'll sure be nice to go home though."

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