

## The String

by

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Dan tried to ignore the sadness that pervaded him whenever he and Jessica did something fun together. He smiled at her and her smile told him, "Don't worry,

Dad, it's all right."

She was much more grown up than him. But that's what a fatal illness often did

to a child, the doctors had told him.

Cincinnati was always cool in spring, and often overcast. Dan squinted at the sky as he unrolled the brilliant dragon kite Jessica had picked out and snared

its breast with a string.

"Come on, Dad," she said, hopping from one foot to another. "What's taking you

so long?"

"I'm kind of concerned about those trees," he said. Huge oaks surrounded the ballfield across the street from their house, but it was the clearest place around. The gusting wind held the sweet tang of rejuvenation. How many springs

would his daughter see? He had to try to knot the string twice; his hand trembled the first time and he missed poking it through.

Jessica was short for her age, eight, and she wheezed a lot. Dan knew she would

be dead in a few years but tried not to think about it too much. He wouldn't live forever either. Anita was bitter about their daughter having cystic fibrosis, and seemed to want to blame it all on Dan, even though she knew that

it took recessive genes from both parents.

Jessica lifted the kite, and its fanciful wings filled with wind. "It's gorgeous," she said. "Purple, red, and yellow."

He smiled at her, and she grinned back, her pale brown hair flying out from the

hat pulled over her ears, her green eyes full of knowledge no child should have

to bear, learned as she lay gasping for breath in an endless stream of anonymous

hospital beds, stuck full of needles which dripped experimental drugs which never worked into her veins, which were getting harder and harder to find.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he asked.

He watched the string run through her hands as the wind took the kite. She played it out until the dragon floated high and small, then began to play with

it, making it swoop, its long tail swirling like invisible writing on the gray

sky.

Then she shrieked as a strong gust pulled the end of the string, which Dan had

wrapped around a stick, from her hand. The dragon hung suspended for a moment,

then zigzagged and plummeted into an oak tree.

"Oh no," said Jessica, looking stunned.

"It's okay," he said. He climbed the tree, cut the string with his penknife, pulled it the kite from the branches, and tossed it down to the ground. It was

a

little ripped up, but he thought he could fix it.

When he was almost down, he saw the tangled string, stuck in a lower branch.

He

reached over, worked it loose, and stuck it in his pocket. Then, holding hands,  
he and Jessica walked back to the old house he'd lived in since he was a child.  
#

Later that night, when he finished putting the dishes away and Jessica was in bed, he remembered the string, and got it out of his pocket. Anita, on one side of the huge kitchen which served as sort of a living room too, was entrenched in her CAD, working on some specs she'd brought home. She was so good her firm had paid to have the computer assisted design setup here at home as well as at the office.

She looked up. "What's that?" she asked.

"Just the kite string."

"Well, we don't need any more clutter around here. Throw it away."

Instead, Dan sat down at the table and studied it. "Look," he said, "it's not really a knot."

"You couldn't get much more knotted than that," Anita said.

"No, look: one end stayed attached to the stick. One end stayed attached to the

kite. It's not a knot. The ends never crossed. Theoretically, it's just a perfectly straight string."

"Right," said Anita. "Sure. That's exactly what it looks like to me. Well, I've

got to get to bed. I guess it's my turn to take Jessica to physical therapy tomorrow," she said, with that familiar resentful edge to her voice.

"I would, but I've got a meeting in the afternoon." He was a structural engineer. He was aware that Anita, a brilliant, moody architect, sometimes found

his methodical, dogged approach to life dull. He often wished he were more spontaneous, but he couldn't help himself. He had long since resigned himself to

being in the background and assisting her rapidly advancing career in any way he

could.

Dan sat at the table for half an hour, studying the string. Finally, he got two

knives out of the drawer and tied one end to each knife.

Then he started to pull little loops from the tight core.

Each loosening opened other possible avenues of unravelling, and he stared into

the heart of the string, more and more fascinated. Each time he created some slack, he followed it down into the core, pulling and teasing, until it was lost

in the nest of tightness. Each time, he felt a little ping of joy when the core

of the string became more and more revealed.

It was three a.m. before he stopped, surprised at the time. How could he have become so absorbed? He was about to untie the string from the knives and throw

it away when he stopped, smiled, and chucked the whole thing in a drawer. At least it was something to do.

He went to bed feeling better than he had in a long time.

#

When he got home from work that night Jessica ran to meet him and said,

"Guess

what? My lung capacity increased."

"Is that true?" Dan asked Anita, who was peeling carrots.

She didn't turn, but stopped what she was doing as she spoke. "That's what they

said," she replied, in the terribly even voice she used whenever they discussed

Jessica's medical problems. Then she went back to scraping carrots.

"That's wonderful, pumpkin," Dan said, and picked Jessica up, tossed her in the

air. They'd learned to celebrate about anything, but this was something extraordinary.

"Yeah," she said, laughing. She went over and opened the silverware drawer so she could set the table. "What's this?" she said, and pulled out the wad of string dangling from one of the knives. "Is this the kite string?"

"Oh, Dan, I thought I told you to throw that away," said Anita.

Dan grabbed it, feeling unaccountably protective. "It's fun," he said. "You'd have to pay a lot of money for a puzzle as good as this." He put it up on a shelf. "Here, I'll help you set the table," he said.

After dinner, when everything was put away, Anita flipped on her CAD again. Her

work was never done. Jessica started her homework, and Dan got his string down

off the shelf and started to play with it.

It was wound quite tightly. He needed something to slide underneath the strands

and pull them. Absently, he got up, rummaged in the drawer, and got two oyster

forks. Hooking one through the central morass, he used the other to work a loop

loose.

As he concentrated, he found himself thinking not about the string, but about Jessica. He tried to push back the relief and happiness he felt about the lung

capacity--after all, within the progress of the disease, it only meant a temporary surcease--but joy nonetheless that Jessica might have a time of easier

breathing, however short, flooded him. Despite himself, he imagined her running,

playing, like other children, unburdened by her constant unnatural prescience of

her own mortality. She was in the baseball field, up to bat, her little rear end

stuck out as she leaned forward from the waist, grasping the bat. Her hair streamed back from her face. "Put 'er here," she yelled at the pitcher.

"What are you doing, Dan?" asked Anita, as her shadow fell across the table.

"Well," he said, startled back into the present, "these are the rules. Since the

ends didn't cross when this was made, the rule is that I have to straighten it

out without pulling the ends through. They always have to stay on the outside."

"Good lord," she said. "Well, it's after midnight." He looked up and saw she had

her nightgown on. "I've been in bed for an hour. You know you don't feel good if

you don't get enough sleep, and I don't know when you got to bed last night."

"You're right," he said, and put the string up on the shelf and went to bed.

But the image of Jessica rounding the bases persisted into his dreams.

#

Three weeks later, he had still not solved the string. He worked on it nightly, much to Anita's disgust. "It's getting dirty," she said. One Tuesday evening, Dan looked up at a knock on the screen door. "Frank," he said. "Come on in."

Frank Jones, a widower from down the street, did, and the door slammed shut behind him. Crickets were gaining in volume and the smell of new-cut grass wafted into the kitchen. Frank, a tall thin man with a good head of snow-white hair, though he was almost seventy, put his hands on his hips and frowned. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Behaving like a crazy man, that's what," said Anita from her terminal. "Dad's untying the string," said Jessica as she rushed through the kitchen. "Where do you think you're going?" asked Dan. "I'm just going out to play hide-and-seek with the kids." "You've got exactly fifteen minutes." "Oh, Dad!"

"I mean it." Dan was secretly pleased. It had been years since she'd felt well enough to keep going for so long, and now she'd be out with the neighborhood kids well after dark each night if he didn't put his foot down. "Oh, all right," she grumbled, and rushed out the door. "Get a beer, Frank, and sit down," said Dan, not lifting his eyes from his puzzle.

"Don't mind if I do." The old man opened the refrigerator, chose a beer, and pulled up a chair made of aluminum tubing. The seat and back were covered with marbled dark green oilcloth. "So what's up?"

Frank's bottle of Rolling Rock hissed as he opened it. "Ahh, nothing much. I wish the kids lived closer, I guess. You know, I got good days and bad days, just like always."

It had been three years since his wife had died suddenly of a stroke, and Frank came in regularly to complain about the loneliness of his life, which Dan knew was quite real.

He remembered Mrs. Jones as he bent over the string, listening to Frank's laments. She had been a bustling, happy woman of the starched laundry school. She raised two boys while Frank put in his thirty years at the mattress factory, all the while tending to her massive garden and baking like a master chef. He also remembered, quite vividly, the Joneses on their evening walk, hand in hand, strolling down the oak-lined street daily for as long as he could remember. He remembered Frank teaching him how to pitch a softball across the street at the park, because his father, though an affable sort, maintained an unfashionable dislike for the sport of the day. Frank's kind face had been younger then, and Dan unaccountably recalled that his eyes had beamed with happiness when, one day, he had looked right into Dan's and said, "You know, this is a lot of fun." Dan had realized, even though he was only ten, that "this" didn't just mean teaching him how to fake out the batter, but was a deep and basic satisfaction and appreciation of life itself.

Dan glanced up at Frank now. He was staring out the window, and his face looked blank and old. Dan didn't know why it had to be that way, why life had to wash through him like a wave and recede. The old man seemed like a discarded pot or

piece of furniture, and it pained him.

He got up and went to the door. "Jessica!" he shouted. "It's been half an hour.

Get in here right now!"

Jessica came pounding up the steps. Her cheeks were flushed in the porch light,

and she dashed in under his arm and rushed upstairs before he could say a word.

"Kids," said Frank, but his face looked just as old and dead.

Later than night, after Anita had gone to bed--she seemed resigned now to his odd obsession--Frank slipped into Dan's mind again. He saw the old man happy and

useful again, face bright, as he'd been right up to the day of Stella's death.

Dan was suspended in the feeling of one man's deep contentment with the way things were, and felt enriched by that sharing. He knew now how rare such a feeling was.

It was only two evenings later that Frank came back. His step on the porch was

so light Dan didn't recognize it, and his face was so altered that for a moment,

looking up from his string, Dan was taken back ten years.

"Come in," said Dan. "You look great."

Frank got his beer and sprawled in the chair, long legs extended, and smiled.

"You know," he said, "after the other night I got to thinking about how often I

come by and whine, and decided to get up off my butt and do something for myself. Went over to the day care on 5th Street and they took me on as a volunteer. I'm telling you, Dan, am I ever glad to get out of that house every

day. Didn't realize how gloomy it was with the curtains always pulled. Those kids are so cute."

His face was the face Dan had imagined. In fact, his breathing stopped for a second as he realized that he'd pictured Frank sitting here just like this, although he'd imagined that the source of his happiness was instead a new girlfriend.

"I bet they are," said Dan.

The clicking of computer keys in the corner stopped and Anita said, "I wish Dan

would do something besides work on that ridiculous string. He needs to get out

and do something else."

"Like what, Anita?" asked Dan, wondering at the fear he felt about being separated from his string.

"Like a movie now and then, that's what. Or just going out for dinner. We haven't done anything in the evening except sit here like two lumps, and I'm getting tired of it!"

"You should have said something," said Dan, pushing the string away. He was very

pleasantly surprised, even if Anita was just reacting jealously to his attention

to the string. "I think we can just make the eight o'clock movie if we hurry."

"Who's going to watch Jessica?"

"I will," said Frank. He often baby-sat, but not usually on such short notice.

"Are you sure?" asked Dan.

"Of course he's sure," said Anita, getting up in a hurry. "Now, where are my keys?"

While he was at the movie, all Dan could think about was what his next move would be in the unravelling of the string. He even dreamed of the string now, and had it memorized, as if it were a chess game he could project. Yet,

whenever  
he loosened one segment, deeper and more complex tanglings became apparent.  
Each  
time, instead of being frustrated, he eagerly delved into the new mystery.  
Dan was startled by a loud explosion. Several characters had just been blown  
up,  
and the screen was filled with gore.  
He found that for some odd reason he had to fight back tears. How could it be  
possible for humans to watch so many deaths, even acted-out deaths, and not  
be  
moved? As he watched, he thought of the war that was in the news lately, in  
Nepal, as China and India battled it out with the Nepalese Nationalists for  
control of the poor, mountainous country. The face of a dead villager that  
he'd  
seen on the cover of Time replaced what was happening in the movie. These  
wars  
would go on and on, and humanity for the most part were as unmoved as those  
in  
the theater with him, and the victims would slide into the vast unnamed  
history  
which held all the countless humans who had been killed by other humans.  
He found Anita's hand, and it was cold and unmoving. " Dan, she whispered,  
"Not  
so tight. You're hurting me."  
He let go, closed his eyes, and tried to unravel the string from memory. As  
he  
did, something white-hot began to burn inside him, anger with all the  
murders,  
all the killing, all the pain.  
He was still angry when they got home and he took the string down. He knew  
that  
Anita was completely disgusted by the way she stomped upstairs, but he  
couldn't  
help himself.  
Faces filled his vision as he delicately pulled and probed: black and white  
dead  
people lined up in Prudential's The World At War that his father had watched  
every Sunday night, leaning against the doorjamb thoughtfully with his lit  
pipe  
in hand; faces from the Vietnam war; the peasant faces from a hundred  
countries  
around the world, stolid and set, fighting for the right to have a say in  
their  
own lives against those who made a profit from them being powerless. He  
remembered the beauty of the country from a trek he'd made in his student  
days,  
and the one healthy village he'd seen among all the poor ones. If only all of  
them could prosper. He carried that image with him into dreams as he put his  
head down, just to rest for a minute, and fell asleep at the table.  
The next morning, while eating breakfast, he leafed through the paper to the  
international section. There it was. Three scant inches devoted to the  
uprising.  
Jessica rushed into the kitchen. "Hey," she said, "Give me that paper!" She  
opened the cupboard and grabbed a bowl, slammed it onto the table. "I forgot,  
I  
need some current events for this morning." She sloshed milk onto her cereal.  
"Sit down," said Dan."  
"I can't. I'll miss the bus."  
"I'll drive you. Here. What about this revolution in Nepal."  
She sidled next to him and glanced at it. "Perfect," she said. "Not too long."

"No," Dan said. "It's definitely not too long." It said nothing about the great privation he knew existed, nothing about the squalor, the lack of medicine, adequate food. It said nothing about the fact that only 10% of Nepalese men could read, and only 2% of the women. It did not say that the average life expectancy was thirty-six years. Jessica read it in the car while he drove her to school.  
#

Three days later, Jessica was back at the international page. "Now Miss Cranshaw wants a follow-up," she said. "Some of the kids asked her what would happen if they couldn't find anything and she said they'd better. Look Dad--this sure is lucky." TREATY GRANTS SOVEREIGNTY TO NEW NEPALESE GOVERNMENT. "It says that India and China have both recognized a new elected government in Nepal," Jessica said. "That's good, isn't it?" "Yes," said Dan, slowly. "That's very good." Jessica looked up at him then, and looked at him a long time. "Your voice sounds funny," she said. "Do you have a cold?" Dan followed her glance and saw that his right hand had clenched into a fist, with the string crushed inside. The knuckles were white. "Careful, Dad," she said. "You'll mess up your string." Dan carefully kept his mind blank that night as he worked the string. There is no connection, he thought. No connection. He turned at a sound, and saw Jessica in her white nightgown standing in the kitchen door. Her eyes were dark and intense, he saw that she was fully awake. "You really stay up late, don't you?" she asked. "Do you think you'll ever untangle that string?" Dan rose and picked her up. She was big, growing so quickly now, and he remembered when she had been a baby and hugged her close, quickly. I hope not, was his first, reflexive thought. "I don't see why not," he said. She was almost asleep again by the time he tucked her back into bed. Then he went to bed himself, leaving the string on the table for once. #

Anita came home from work in a bad mood, just as she had for two weeks. "Damn it," she said, as she flung her leather diskette holder onto the kitchen table, "they've had plenty of time to look over that museum proposal. Mine is the best they're going to get." "I'm sure it is," said Dan. He'd been doing his best to keep her on an even keel. For some reason she felt as if her entire career was riding on this one proposal, and that if it wasn't accepted there would be an inevitable downhill slide into obscurity. And yet, the thought of her getting this job frightened him. Their marriage seemed in shambles, and he felt as if that would be the last straw, her spending as much time as she would have to on the museum. "Oh, what do you care?" she snapped. "All you ever do is play with that string." Dan didn't even protest any more. He realized that it looked silly, but it

was  
far past an obsession. It was simply a necessity of his life. Sometimes it  
felt  
as if the string were playing with him as much as he played with the string,  
unravelling and changing portions of his life.  
For one thing, Jessica had been much improved over the summer. The new  
genetic  
inhalant therapy they'd tried had been successful, and though the doctors  
warned them that it was probably just another stopgap, research was coming  
out  
which showed that it might constitute a very real cure for cystic fibrosis.  
Dan  
basked in Jessica's ever-growing wellness.  
The phone rang, and Anita leaped to answer it. "Yes?" she asked breathless.  
"Yes, this is Anita Brewer." There was a long silence, and finally she said,  
in  
a dull voice, "I see."  
She hung up the phone and said, "I didn't get it."  
Anita's pain hit Dan so hard he couldn't breath. "It will be all right,  
honey,"  
he said, and tried to give her a hug. Now maybe she'll pay more attention to  
me.  
And to Jessica.  
"Oh, leave me alone, you idiot," she said. "What do you know?" She left the  
room.  
Dan followed her, but she slammed and locked the bedroom door.  
He fixed dinner for Jessica. "What's wrong with Mom?" she asked.  
"She doesn't feel good," he said. "She didn't get the contract."  
"Oh."  
Later that night, as he played with the string, images of Anita as a graduate  
student filled his mind. How radiant she had been, immersed in the  
complexities  
of architecture, realizing for the first time that she could really be  
top-notch. He'd been amazed that someone so talented could care for him, had  
been overwhelmed with gratitude when she'd agreed to marry him.  
It was that feeling of being on the cutting edge which pleased her, which was  
her reason for life, he realized, not him; not even Jessica.  
Still, it pleased him to see her like that, filled with the power her own way  
of  
thinking brought her, the power which came from others accepting it as valid,  
praising it, giving her awards, peopling her visionary structures as they  
were  
constructed and used. There was a truth about her which transcended her day  
to  
day pettiness and that was what Dan loved about her, even though his life  
with  
her could be miserable if he let her get to him.  
But his image of the happy family battled with that, as if by desire he could  
force their hearts and minds into some fifties sitcom of harmonious life even  
if  
it went all frayed and off the edges. It hadn't been easy having a terminally  
ill child, but Jessica was better now.  
And as he worked, the vision of Anita happy in her profession receded. She had  
a  
good job at the firm. Why couldn't she be happy with that? It was important  
that  
Jessica have a good, stable home. Anita didn't have to work so hard, every  
evening, and weekends too. She could afford to let some of that slide.  
As he worked that evening, anger slowly subsided into a self-righteous  
stubbornness. But earlier than usual, Dan decided that he was too tired to



make  
much more headway and put it away. The bedroom door was still locked, so he  
lay  
down on the couch and threw the afghan over himself.  
#

The next evening, Frank came by. His footsteps on the old wood treads of the  
back porch were tired and hesitant. He stood outside the screen door for a  
few

moments just staring, not into the room, but just staring.

Dan jumped up from the table. The string had felt dead in his hands tonight,  
and

he felt as if he was making no progress at all. No sooner did he pull one  
strand

out than another portion knotted even more tightly. He opened the door and  
pulled Frank in. "Sit down," he said. "What's wrong?"

Frank's face worked, but he didn't cry, as Dan feared he would. Instead he  
said,

"One of the kids ran out in the road today and got hit by a car."

Anita looked up from across the room. "Oh, no," she breathed. "Yeah, well, it  
was real lucky. Kid just bounced off the car and got a lot of scrapes. Flew  
through the air onto the grass next to the road. But it was my fault."

"It was?" asked Dan.

"Yeah," he said. "I think so. They told me it wasn't, that it was Cassandra's  
job to be watching the kids, and another aide that's been there for years,  
but

I'd just turned away to tie somebody's shoe and this silly kid was over the  
fence--kind of a wild boy, everybody says, they've been thinking about  
telling

his parents they can't handle him anyway--"

"So it wasn't your fault, Frank," said Dan.

"It doesn't sound like it to me," said Anita. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm too old for this sort of thing," said Frank. "I saw him go, but you know,  
I

just can't move too fast any more."

Jessica ran downstairs. "Frank!" she said, and hugged him. Then she was out  
the  
door.

"I don't think I'm going back," said Frank. He stood and shrugged.

"You're not leaving already, are you?" asked Dan. "Have a beer."

Frank did, but they couldn't coax many more words out of him, and after an  
hour

he left.

When Anita shut down her computer just afterwards, Dan was startled. "So  
early?"

he asked. "What's the use?" she asked. "I've given it my best. I've tried as  
hard as I can try. I know I've done good work. I know the proposal was  
excellent. I don't know what happened, Dan. What's the point? I might as well  
face it. I'm just going to be another obscure, faceless architect working in  
some huge firm, pandering to the vision of some old fart prima donna all my  
life." She laughed wryly. "I thought I'd be that old fart prima donna. Oh,  
Dan,

I had so many hopes."

That night Dan slipped the string into the drawer very early and went to bed.  
He

didn't get it out again the next night, or the next.

"Why aren't you doing your string, Dad?" Jessica asked one night.

"Oh, I just got tired of it," he said.

"Please do it some more," she asked. "I liked it when you did."

"No," he said. "It was just a silly thing."

"It wasn't," she said, and he remembered the look she had given him from the kitchen door that night when he'd carried her back to bed. She knew. She knew, anyway, what he thought had been happening. They had always been so close. He hugged her now. "It was just a string, honey. That's all. A little game for daddy, a puzzle. It was taking up all my time." "Something like that should take up all of your time," she said, and he was startled by the gravity and conviction in her voice.  
#

Two weeks later Dan got a call at work about Jessica, who had been suddenly unable to breathe at school. An ambulance had just picked her up. Dan rushed to the hospital. Anita was already there, in Jessica's room. Jessica had an oxygen mask over her face. "They don't know what happened," she said, crying. "Oh, Dan, I just can't stand it. I guess I was hoping that she was really better, even though it just doesn't make sense. They kept saying that it was experimental." Dan held her as she cried, and looked over her shoulders onto Jessica's still face. They decided to take turns staying with her in intensive care. Anita took the first night, and after Dan had dropped off some clothes and books for her, he went home to a dark, empty house. He turned on the kitchen light, opened the drawer, and got out the string. It was just a rough, inert mass of cord. Nothing more. He was an idiot, a crazy man, to believe that such things were possible, no matter what the evidence seemed to be. He bent over it for an hour or more, but found, to his surprise, that he was crying. What had gone wrong? His little girl had been coming alive. Now it was all back the way it was before. How many times had they run this hospital drill before? How many nights by her bedside while she struggled for breath, the innocent victim of their gene sequences? Shit on this string, shit on this idiocy, shit on this stupid, imperfect life where little girls died for no good reason, where genocide and hate prevailed, where nothing was ever any good. He flung it into the corner of the room and turned out the light. His heart, when he climbed the stairs alone, was heavier than it had ever felt in his entire life, even when they'd finally had the sweat test done on Jessica and found that she had CF. Because it had seemed within his power, during these last few months, to actually change things for the better, the contrast was grim and complete. And maybe, he thought on the verge of sleep, it had been within his power, and he had, quite miserably failed. Out of selfishness and greed, as if he were in a Grimm's fairy tale, because he had wanted his own way, his own vision, to prevail, and because there were places of darkness in that vision of which he could not ever be aware.  
#

Dan woke, and the room was black.  
And yet, something had happened.  
His body felt light and spacious, and he wondered if he was dreaming. Within  
his  
interior was not blood and cells, not bones and blood and muscles.  
Instead, he was a tangled skein, caught by a tree limb, utterly twisted,  
never  
to be free. He was himself that odd, unknotted yet inextricably tangled  
entity,  
one end loose in birth and the other in death, and this strange passage  
called  
life was an immense and tangled surprise, one which all the thought and  
effort  
in the world, every effort which time would afford him, could not unravel.  
There  
were certain givens in this equation, that was all.  
And yet he could see, as he lay there in the dark, that this knot, this  
amazement of himself, was composed of points. Point after point after point,  
spilling into infinity, uncountable. Whether a myriad of intersecting planes  
made soft and malleable beneath his questing fingers or a fluid, graceful  
line,  
each point glowed, glowed so strongly in the dark so he was surprised that  
the  
string of which he was composed did not light the room. He expected at any  
moment that a nimbus would surround him, or the bed on which he lay. Or it  
might  
come from the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the thin lace curtains, the  
heavy  
old furniture his mother had polished for years of his life. Anywhere.  
Everywhere. He was absorbed into the infinite number of points he had become,  
every single one a nexus he knew he would never understand.  
But he discovered that he could move them around.  
And then, it was as if the string was free at every point, that each point  
had  
an infinitesimal gap between it and the next, and impulse flew from point to  
point like neurons firing, only his entire body was free and loose, releasing  
information, pure intelligence which was not really him, into some dark,  
fathomless void, and he was fully, sharply awake.  
He rose from bed and went downstairs. He didn't even have to turn on the  
light  
to do that; forty years of navigating the house had removed every surprise.  
The string, when he flipped on the kitchen light, was still lying forlorn in  
the  
corner, just a dirty string tied to two knives.  
He walked over, picked it up, and sat at the table. And as he worked on it  
once  
more, the pain drained from him. And every point on the string began to glow.  
He knew he wouldn't stop again.  
#  
It was two weeks before they were sure that the medicine was adjusted  
correctly  
and they let Jessica go home. She was going to be all right. It was just so  
new,  
that sometimes they overshot. A lot of fine tuning to be done, the doctors  
said.  
When Anita came home the next day after work, she looked happy and troubled  
at  
the same time.  
"What's up?" he asked.

"It's kind of strange," she said. "I've been offered a fellowship by a committee at Harvard. I told them it must be a mistake, that I never applied, and they said that they simply considered the people they thought were the best in the field and deliberated until they came to a conclusion. Dan, I'm stunned." "You knew you were good," he said. "That's wonderful. So what's wrong?" She went into the living room and sat down. "I've been meaning to tell you for some time, Dan, but I'm such a coward." "What is it?" he asked, feeling the chilling inevitability of the moment, when he would have to let all his hopes and dreams and plans diverge from what was going to happen.

For Anita.

"I'm just not happy with you," she said. "But it was easier to stay together than not. Everything is so--settled, here. And I guess I felt guilty about--about wanting to leave you. But now--"

"What about Jessica?" he whispered, because he couldn't make his voice any louder. He was filled with fear, he realized, not just because she was leaving

but because she might take Jessica with her. Anita sat down on the couch.

"I've

thought about it a lot. I've read a lot too, Dan. It's not just me. It's hard on

everyone who has a child with a disability. You've done all the work of raising

her because I've been so afraid of getting close and then losing her. She doesn't need me like she needs you."

"She does!" he said.

"She doesn't and you know it. She needs to live here, because she has to be close to the University. I'm not thinking about anything drastic, really. I just

want to move to Boston so I can concentrate on this project. I know it's kind of

abstract to you, but I think I can make a real difference in the field. So many

new things are happening in architecture. I want to be part of it."

"I know," he said as gently as he could.

She stood and looked at him very directly. "I still want to be a part of Jessica's life."

Just not yours.

He knew now what to say. But he had to say something.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll work something out. I think this is the best thing, for now, anyway." He hoped she couldn't see how his heart ached. But at

least Jessica would be here. He could manage.

"Then it's settled," she said.

Is that all? he thought, as supper preparations brought them together, as they

had for eight years. He realized that, oddly enough, it was.

Frank cheered him that night by dropping by, his step light once more. "They kept calling me every day, even the kids got on the phone to tell me that they

missed me. God, I'm glad to be back there. It's great to be needed."

And every night, Dan bent over the string without even thinking of ever unravelling it. One straight piece of string, forever tangled. The pain he felt

from Anita leaving was still just as strong, but oddly enough, it helped to channel it into the string. It seemed to give off a cool, bright energy, when the house was quiet, and he didn't have to think about how empty the future

would seem without her sharp energy, her presence at her CAD every night,  
even  
her chiding tongue. He had to let her go.  
#

They spent the next week dividing things up. Dan helped her pack. She didn't take much, but went through all the drawers and cupboards. "I'll need these pots," she'd say, and he'd say, "Take them." It was like that with everything.

On the last evening she was to be there, the scent of the blossoming snowball bushes his mother had planted wafted in the window.

Anita and Jessica had both gone to bed. He reached up on the shelf, but felt no

string. He hoisted himself up on the counter and, kneeling, peered at the empty shelf. Nothing.

Heart beating hard, he looked at all the knickknack shelves on both sides of the

window over the sink. He saw that Anita had taken his mother's little horses--well, that was all right. He moved planters and statues that had been there since he was a kid--some of them even stuck to the ancient, dusty wood. Nothing.

Maybe he'd put it in a drawer instead. Panicking, he pulled open drawer after drawer, rummaged through them, and then opened the lower cupboards, completely

out of his head, and started throwing the pans that were left out onto the kitchen floor.

Anita appeared in the doorway, hair tousled from sleep. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? My string is gone, that's what's wrong."

Anita was silent. Dan stared at her.

"You didn't."

"I did. I hate that string, Dan. If you hadn't sat there like a zombie with it

for the past six months, we might not have ended up like this."

Dan knew that was true, but not for the reasons she thought. He switched on the

porch light and ran outside.

Luckily, the trash hadn't been collected yet, but the pile was horrendous, full

of the debris they'd discarded in their massive housecleaning.

It was two in the morning when he finally found it, sodden with grease in a bag

of rancid garbage.

"Thank God," he whispered.

He reverently took it into the house and filled the sink with soap and a little

bleach. He let it sit for a few minutes, careful to disturb it as little as possible, and then carefully squished water through it and pressed it between

a

towel.

He looked up, and Jessica was standing in the kitchen doorway again.

"You're getting to be quite a nightowl," he said.

"The medicine keeps me awake, I think," she said, watching him with wide eyes.

"What happened to the string?"

"Oh," he said. "I accidentally threw it out."

She was quiet for a moment. He suspected she knew the truth.

"I'm glad you found it," she said finally. "I think the string is very important."

Then she walked across the room and hugged him.

As she stood there, pressed against him, he held her small shoulders with one arm, switched off the light with the other hand, and looked out the window at the night.

It was clear and cold, and stars shimmered through the bare tree branches which

laced together in front of the glass.

He thought that all the space which surrounded them at this moment, stretching

out galaxy beyond galaxy, was nothing compared to the infinity of light, the immense, glowing, and tangled grandeur, within the two of them.

The End

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