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Mila sits at her desk in Ohio and picks up the handle of the new disposable razor in ... Shen Zhen, China? Juarez, Mexico? She can't remember where they're assembling the parts. She pans left and right and decides it must be Shen Zhen, because when she looks around there's no one else in camera range. There's a twelve hour time zone difference. It's eleven at night in China, so the only other activity is another production engineer doing telepresence work—waldos sorting through a bin of hinge joints two tables over in a pool of light. Factories are dim and dirty places, but cameras need light, so telepresence stations are islands in the darkness.

She lifts the dark blue plastic part in front of the CMM and waits for it to measure the cavity. She figures they're running about 20% out of spec, but they are so behind on the razor product launch they can't afford to have the vendor resupply, so tomorrow, underpaid Chinese employees in Shen Zhen raw materials will have to hand inspect the parts, discard the bad ones and send the rest to packaging.

Her phone rings.

She disengages the waldos and the visor. The display is her home number and she winces.

“Hello?” says her husband, Gus. “Hello, who is this?”

“It's Mila,” she says. “It's Mila, honey.”

“Mila?” he says. “That's what the Speed Dial said. “Where are you?”

“I'm at work,” she says.

“At P&G?” he says.

“No, honey, now I work for Gillette. You worked for Gillette, too.”

“I did not,” he says, suspicious. Gus has Alzheimer's. He is 57.

“Where's Cathy?” Mila asks.

“Cathy?” his voice lowers. “Is that her name? I was calling because she was here. What is she doing in our house?”

“She's there to help you,” Mila says helplessly. Cathy is the new home health. She's been watching Gus during the day for almost three weeks now, but Gus still calls to ask who she is.

“She's black,” Gus says. “Not that it matters. Is she from the neighborhood? Is she Dan's friend?” Dan is their son. He's twenty-five and living in Boulder.

“Are you hungry?” Mila asks. “Cathy can make you a sandwich. Do you want a sandwich?”

“I don't need help,” Gus says, “Where's my car? Is it in the shop?”

“Yes,” Mila says, seizing on the excuse.

“No it's not,” he says. “You're lying to me. There's a woman here, some strange woman, and she's taken my car.”

“No, baby,” Mila says. “You want me to come home for lunch?” It's eleven, she could take an early lunch. Not that she really wants to go home if Gus is agitated.

Gus hangs up the phone.

Motherfucker. She grabs her purse.

* * * *

Cathy is standing at the door, holding her elbows. Cathy is twenty-five and Gus is her first assignment from the home healthcare agency. Mila likes her, likes even her beautifully elaborate long, polished fingernails. “Mrs. Schuster? Mr. Schuster is gone. I was going to follow his minder but he took my locator. I'm sorry, it was in my purse and I never thought he'd take it out—”

“Oh, Jesus,” Mila says. She runs upstairs and gets her minder from her bedside table. She flicks it on

and it says that Gus is within 300 meters. The indicator arrow says he's headed away from Glenwood, where all the traffic is, and down towards the dead end or even the pond.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Schuster," Cathy says.

"He's not far," Mila says. "It's not your fault. He's cunning."

They go down the front steps. Cathy is so young. So unhappy right now, still nervously hugging her elbows as if her ribs hurt. Her fingernails are pink with long sprays like a rays from a sunrise on each nail. She trails along behind Mila, scuffing in her cute flats. She's an easy girl, usually unflustered. Mila had so hoped that Gus would like her.

Gus is around the corner towards the dead end. He's in the side yard of someone's house Mila doesn't know—thank God that nobody is ever home in the daytime except kids. He's squatting in a flower garden and he has his pants down, she can see his hairy thighs. She hopes he isn't shitting on his pants. Behind him, pale pink hollyhocks rise in spikes.

"Gus!" she calls.

He waves at her to go away.

"Gus," she says. Cathy is still trailing her. "Gus, what are you doing?"

"Can't a man go to the bathroom in peace?" he says, and he sounds so much like himself that if she wasn't used to all the craziness she might have burst into tears.

She doesn't cry. She doesn't care. That's when she decides it's all got to stop. Because she just doesn't care.

* * * *

"It is sometimes possible to cure Alzheimer's, it's just not possible to cure the person who has Alzheimer's," the treatment info explains. "We can fix the brain and replace the damaged neurons with new brain but we can't replace the memories that are gone." It's the way Alzheimer's has been all along, Mila thinks, a creeping insidious disease that takes away the person you knew and leaves this angry, disoriented stranger. The video goes on to explain how the treatment—which is nearly completely effective in only about 30% of cases, but which arrests the progress of the disease in 90% of the cases and provides some functional improvement in almost all cases—cannot fix the parts of the brain that have been destroyed.

Mila is a quality engineer. This is a place she is accustomed to, a place of percentages and estimations, of statements of certainty about large groups, and only guesses about particular individuals. She can translate it, 'We can promise you everything, we just can't promise it will happen to Gus.'

Gus is gone anyway, except in odd moments of habit.

When Gus was diagnosed they had talked about whether or not they should try this treatment. They had sat at the kitchen table, a couple of engineers, and looked at this carefully. Gus had said no. "In five years," he'd said, "there's a good chance the Alzheimer's will come back. So then we'll have spent all this money on a treatment that didn't do any good and where will you be then?"

In some people it reverses in five years. But they've only been doing it for seven years, so who knows.

Gus had diagramed the benefits. At very best he would be cured. Most likely they would only have spent a lot of money to slow the disease down. "And even if I'm cured, the disease could come roaring back," he'd said. "I don't think I want to have this disease for a long time. I know I don't want to have it twice."

His hands are small for a man, which sounds dainty but isn't. His hands are perfect, the nails neat and smooth, but he hadn't been fussy. He'd been deft with a pencil, had been good at engineering drawings before they did them on computer, and his diagram of benefits and liabilities on a piece of computer paper had been neat. "Don't cry," he'd said.

Gus couldn't handle it when she cried. For the thirty years of their marriage, when she'd had to cry—which was always at night, at least in her memory—she'd gone downstairs after he'd gone to sleep and sat on the couch and cried. She would have liked him to comfort her, but in marriage you learn what other people's limits are. And you learn your own.

For the cost of her house, she can have them put an enzyme in Gus' brain that will scrub out the Alzheimeric plaque that has replaced so much of his neural structure. And then they will put in undifferentiated cells and a medium called Transglycyn and that medium will contain a virus that tells the DNA within the cells to create neurons and grow him a new brain.

She calls Dan in Boulder.

"I thought you and Dad didn't want to do this," Dan says.

"I thought so, too," she says. "But I didn't know what it would be like."

Dan is silent. Digital silence. You can hear a pin drop silence. "Do you want me to come home?" he asks.

"No," she says. "No, you stay out there. You just started your job." Dan is a chef. He studied at the Culinary Institute of America, and spent a couple of years as a line chef in the Four Seasons in New York. Now Etienne Corot is opening a new restaurant in Boulder called, of course, 'Corot', and Dan has gotten a job as sous chef. It's a promotion. The next step in making a name for himself, so that someday he can open a restaurant himself.

"You need to keep your eye on Schuster's," she says. It's an old joke between them, that he's going to open a four star restaurant called Schuster's. They both agree that Schuster's sounds like a Big Boy franchise.

"Artesia'," he says.

"Is that it?" she asks.

"That's the latest name," he says. They have been trading names for the restaurant he will someday open since he started at the Culinary Institute. "You like it?"

"As long as I don't think about the cattle town in New Mexico."

"No shit," he says, and she can imagine him at the other end of the phone, ducking his head the way his

dad does. Dan is an inch taller than Gus, with the same long legs and arms. Unfortunately, he got her father's hairline and already, at twenty-five, his bare temples make her tender and protective.

"I can fly out," he says.

"It's not like surgery," she says, suddenly irritated. She wants him to fly out, but there isn't any point in it. "And I'd get tired of us sitting there holding hands for the next three months while they eradicate the plaque, because as far as you and I will be able to tell, nothing will be happening."

"Okay," he says.

"Dan," she says. "I feel as if I'm spending your money."

"I don't care about the money. I don't like to talk about it that way, anyway," he says. "I just feel weird because dad said not to do it."

"I know," she says. "But I don't feel as if this person is your dad anymore."

"It won't be dad when it's done, will it," Dan says.

"No," Mila says. "No, but at least maybe it will be a person who can take care of himself."

"Look, mom," he says, his voice serious and grown-up. "You're there. You're dealing with it every day. You do what you have to do. Don't worry about me."

She feels tears well up in her eyes. "Okay, honey," she says. "Well, you've got stuff you need to do."

"Call me if you want me to come out," he says.

She wants him off the phone before she cries. "I will," she says.

"Love you, mom," he says.

She knows he can tell she was crying.

* * * *

"I'm not sick," Gus says.

"It's a check-up," Mila says.

Gus sits on the examining room table in his shorts and t-shirt. It used to be that she said the litany of what she loved when she saw him like this—his nose, his blue eyes made to look the distance, the hollow of his collar bone, his long legs. Show me your butt, she'd say and he'd turn and shake it at her and they'd cackle like children.

"We've waited long enough," Gus says.

"It's not that long," Mila says, and at that moment the doctor knocks and opens the door. With him is a technician, a black woman, with a cart.

“Who are you,” Gus says.

“I’m Dr. Feingold.” He is patient, is Dr. Feingold. He met with them for an hour yesterday and he talked with them for a few minutes this morning before Gus had his blood work. But Gus doesn’t remember. Gus was worse than usual. They are in Atlanta for the procedure. Lexington, Kentucky and Windsor, Ontario both have clinics that do the procedures, but Dr. Feingold had worked with Raymond Miller, the PhD who originated the treatment. So she picked Atlanta.

Gus is agitated. “You’re not my doctor,” he says.

Dr. Feingold says, “I’m a specialist, Mr. Schuster. I’m going to help you with your memory problems.”

Gus looks at Mila.

“It’s true,” she says.

“You’re trying to hurt me,” Gus says. “In fact, you’re going to kill me, aren’t you.”

“No, honey,” she says. “You’re sick. You have Alzheimer’s. I’m trying to help you.”

“You’ve been poisoning me,” Gus says. Is it because he’s scared? Because everything is so strange?

“Do you want to get dressed?” Dr. Feingold says. “We can try this in an hour.”

“I don’t want to try anything,” Gus says. He stands up. He’s wearing white athletic socks and he has the skinny calves of an old man. The disease has made him so much older than 57. In a way she is killing him. Gus will never come back and now she’s going to replace him with a stranger.

“Take some time,” Dr. Feingold says. Mila has never been to a doctor’s office where the doctor wasn’t scheduled to death. But then again, she’s never paid \$74,000 for a doctor’s visit, which is what today’s injection of brain scrubbing Transglycyn will cost. Not really just the visit and the Transglycyn. They’ll stay here two more days and Gus will be monitored.

“God damn,” Gus says, sitting back down. “God damn you all.”

“All right, Mr. Schuster,” Dr. Feingold says.

The technician pushes the cart over and Dr. Feingold says, “I’m going to give you an injection, Mr. Schuster.”

“God damn,” Gus says again. Gus never much said ‘God damn’ before.

The Transglycyn with the enzyme is supposed to be injected in the spine but Dr. Feingold takes a hypodermic and gives Gus a shot in the crook of his arm.

“You just lie there a moment,” Dr. Feingold says.

Gus doesn’t say anything.

“Isn’t it supposed to be in his back?” Mila says.

“It is,” Dr. Feingold says, “but right now I want to reduce his agitation. So I've given him something to calm him.”

“You didn't say anything about that,” she says.

“I don't want him to change his mind while we're giving him the enzyme. This will relax him and make him compliant.”

“Compliant,” she says. She's supposed to complain, they're drugging him and they didn't tell her they would. But she's pretty used to him not being compliant. Complaint sounds good. It sounds excellent. “Is it a tranquilizer?” she asks.

“It's a new drug,” Dr. Feingold says. He is writing it down on Gus' chart. “Most tranquilizers can further agitate patients with Alzheimer's.”

“I have Alzheimer's,” Gus says dopyly. “It makes me agitated. But sometimes I know it.”

“Yes, Mr. Schuster,” Dr. Feingold says. “You do. This is Vicki. Vicki is someone who helps me with this all the time, and we're very good at doing it, but when we roll you on your side, I need you to lie very still, all right?”

Gus, who hated when doctors patronized him says dopyly, “All right.” Gus, who during a colonoscopy, higher than a kite on Demerol, asked his doctor if they had gotten to the ileum, because even with his brain cradled in opiates, Gus just liked to *know* .

Vicki and Dr. Feingold roll Gus onto his side.

“Are you comfortable, Mr. Schuster?” Vicki asks. She has a down-home Atlanta accent.

Dr. Feingold goes back out the door. He comes back in with two more people, both men, and they put a cushion behind Gus's knees so it's hard for him to roll over, and then another cushion at the back of his neck.

“Are you all right, Mr. Schuster?” Dr. Feingold asks. “Are you comfortable?”

“Okay,” Gus says, fuzzy.

Vicki pulls his undershirt up and exposes his knobby backbone. Dr. Feingold marks a place with a black pen. He feels Gus' back like a blind woman, his face absent with concentration, and then he takes a needle and says, “There will be a prick, Mr. Schuster. This will make the skin on your back numb, okay?” He gives Gus another shot.

Gus says, “Ow,” solemnly.

And then Dr. Feingold and Vicki make some marks with the pen. Then there is another needle, and Dr. Feingold makes a careful injection in Gus's back. He leaves the needle in a moment, pulls the part of the hypodermic out that had medication in it, and Vicki takes it and gives him another one that he puts that in the hypodermic and injects it.

Mila isn't sure if that's more painkiller or the Transglycyn.

“Okay, Mr. Schuster,” Dr. Feingold says. “We’re done with the medicine. But you lie still for a few minutes.”

“Is it like a spinal tap?” Mila asks. “Will he get a headache?”

Dr. Feingold shakes his head. “No, Mrs. Schuster, that’s it. When he feels like sitting up, he can.”

So now it is inside him. Soon it will start eating the plaque in his brain.

The places it will eat clean were not Gus anymore, anyway. It’s not as if Gus is losing anything more. It bothers her, though, the Transglycyn goo moving along the silver-gray pathways of his neurons, dissolving the Swiss cheese damage of the disease. And then, what, there are gaps in his head? Fluid filled gaps in his brain, the tissue porous as a sponge and poor Gus, shambling along, angry and desperate.

She wants to stroke his poor head. But he is quiet now, sedated, and maybe it’s best to let him be.

* * * *

The clinic is more like a hotel than a hospital, the bed has a floral bedspread and over it is a painting of cream and peach roses in a vase. After being sedated during the day, Gus is restless. He will not go to bed. If she goes to bed he’ll try to go out into the hall, but the door is locked from the inside so he can’t get out. There’s a touchpad next to the door and she’s used 0815, Dan’s birthday, as the code. She doesn’t think Gus knows Dan’s birthday anymore. A sign on the door says, ‘In Case of Fire, All Doors Will Open Automatically.’ Gus runs his fingers along the crack between the door and the wall. “I want to go out,” he says, and she says that he can’t. “I want to go out,” he says, and she says, “we’re not home, we have to stay here.”

“I want to go out,” he says, again and again, long after she stops answering him. He finally sits and watches five minutes of television but then he gets up and goes back to the door. “Let’s go home,” he says this time, and when she doesn’t answer, he runs his long fingers like spiders up and down the edge of the door. He sits, he gets up and stands at the door for minutes, twenty, thirty minutes at a time, until she is blind with fatigue and her eyes burn with tears and she finally shrieks, “There’s no way out!”

For a moment he looks at her, befuddled. The he turns back to the door and says, querulously, “I want to go out.”

At one point she goes to him and folds both his hands in hers and says, “We’re both trapped.” She is dizzy with fatigue but if she cries he will just get worse. He looks at her and then goes back to searching the door, moth fingers fluttering. She turns out the light and he howls, “Oww-ow-oww-ow—” until she snaps the light back on.

Finally, she shoves past him and locks him in the room. She goes down to the lounge and sits down on a couch, pulling her bare feet up and tucking them under her nightgown. The lounge is deserted. She thinks about sleeping here for a few hours. She feels vacant and exposed. She leans her head back and closes her eyes and there is the distant white noise of the ventilation system and the strange audible emptiness of a big room and she can feel her brain swooping instantly into a kind of nightmare where she is sliding into sleep thinking someone is sick and she needs to do something and when she jerks awake her whole body feels a flush of exhaustion.

She can’t stay here. Is Gus howling in the room?

When she opens the door he is standing there, but she has the odd feeling he may not have noticed she was gone.

He finally lets her talk him into lying down around 3:15 in the morning but he is up again a little after six.

She asks the next day if it is the stuff they've injected, but of course, it's not. It's the strangeness. The strange room, the strange place, the Alzheimer's, the ruin of his brain.

The social worker suggests that until they are ready to insert the cellular material and stimulate neural growth, Gus should go to a nursing facility for elderly with dementia.

Even if she could afford it, Mila thinks she would have to say no. When they resculpt his brain, he will be a different person, but she will still be married to him, and she wants to stay with him and to be part of the whole process, so that maybe her new husband, the new Gus, will still be someone she loves. Or at least someone she can be married to.

* * * *

Mila is lucky they can afford this. It is an experimental treatment so insurance doesn't cover the cost. She and Gus have money put away for retirement from his parents and hers, but she can't touch that or capital gains taxes will go off, as her accountant says, like a time bomb. But they can sell their house.

The old house sells for \$217,000. The first half of the treatment is about \$74,000. The second half of the treatment is a little over \$38,000. Physical therapy is expected to cost a little over \$2,100 a month. Home health is \$32,000 through an agency (insurance will no longer pay because this is an experimental treatment.) That doesn't include airfare and a thousand incidentals. At least the house is paid off, and the tax man does some finagling and manages to save her \$30,000 for a down payment on a little townhouse.

It has two floors, a postage sized back yard, and monthly maintenance fees of \$223 a month. Her mortgage is \$739 a month.

It has a living room and kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs. The carpet is a pale gray, and her living room furniture, which is all rich medieval reds and ochre and ivory, doesn't go well, but it doesn't look bad, either.

“Why is our couch here?” Gus asks plaintively. “When can we go home?”

* * * *

One evening when he says he wants to go home she puts him in the car and starts driving. When Dan was a baby, when he wouldn't go to sleep, the sound of a car engine would sooth him, and this evening it seems to have the same affect on Gus. He settles happily into the passenger seat of their seven-year-old Honda sedan, and as she drives he strokes the armrest and croons. She's not sure at first if the crooning means he's agitated, but after awhile she decides it's a happy sound.

“You like going for a ride?” she says to him.

He doesn't answer but he keeps on crooning, ‘ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo’.

* * * *

Another night she wakes up alone in the bed. Alzheimer's victims don't sleep much. Used to be that if Gus or Dan got up in the night she heard them, but she's pretty tired these days.

She finds him downstairs in the kitchen, taking the bowl of macaroni and cheese out of the refrigerator. It's covered in foil because she's out of plastic wrap. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

Gus says, "I can take care of it." His tone is ordinary and reassuring. He puts the bowl in the microwave.

"You can't put it in the microwave, honey," Mila says. "You have to take the foil off the top first." She hates that she only calls him 'honey' when she is exasperated with him, and when she doesn't want to make him angry. It feels passive aggressive. Or something.

Gus closes the microwave door and pushes the time button.

"Gus," she says, "don't do that." She reaches past him and opens the microwave door, and he pushes her away.

"Gus," she says, "don't." She reaches for the door and he pushes her away again.

"Leave it alone," he says.

"You can't," she says. "It's got foil on it." Gus is an engineer, for God's sake. Or was.

She tries to stop him, puts her hand on his forearm, and he turns to face her, his face a grimace of anger, and he pulls his arm back and punches her in the face.

He is still a strong, tall man and the punch knocks her down.

She doesn't even know how to feel it. No one has punched her since she was maybe twelve, and that was a pretty ineffective punch, even if her nose did bleed. It stops her from thinking. She is lying on the kitchen floor. Gus pushes the start button on the microwave.

Mila touches her face. Her lip is cut, she can taste the blood. Her face hurts.

There is a flicker as the microwave arcs. She doesn't have it in her to get up and do anything about it. Gus frowns. Not at her, at the microwave.

Mila sits up and explores her face. One of her teeth feels wobbly to her tongue. Gus doesn't pay any attention, he's watching the microwave. He's intent. It's a parody of the engineer solving a problem.

The microwave starts arcing in earnest and Gus steps back.

Mila sits on the floor until the microwave starts smoking and only then does she get up. She doesn't even feel like crying, although her mouth and cheek hurt. She pushes cancel on the microwave and then pulls it out of the alcove and unplugs it. She leaves it half pulled out and goes over to the sink and spits bloody saliva. She rinses her mouth and then washes the sink out.

"Go on up to bed," she says.

Gus looks at her. Is he angry? She steps back, out of range. Now she is scared. He's not a child, he's a

big man. Is he going to be upset with her because he's still hungry?

"I'll heat you up some soup," she says. "Okay?"

Gus looks away, his mouth a little open.

She grabs an oven mitt, opens the smoking microwave carefully and takes out the macaroni and cheese. The ceramic bowl has cracked in half and the foil is blackened, but she holds it together until she can throw it out. Gus sits down. She takes the microwave outside on the grass. She doesn't think it's burning inside, but she isn't sure. She can't sit and watch it, not with Gus unsupervised. So if it starts to smolder, it starts to smolder. The grass is damp.

Back inside she finds Gus in the living room eating ice cream out of the carton with a serving spoon. There is ice cream on him and on the couch.

She's afraid to go near him, so she sits down on a chair and watches him eat.

She cannot shake the feeling that the man in front of her should not be Gus, because the Gus she has been married to would not, would never, hit her. The Gus she was married to had certain characteristics that were inalienable to him—his neatness—almost fussiness. His meticulousness. His desperate need to be good, to be oh so good. But this is still Gus, too. Even as the ice cream drips on his legs and on the couch. What exactly is Gus? What defines Gusness? What is it she married? It is not just this familiar body. There is some of Gus inside, too. Something present that she can't put her finger on, maybe only habits of Gusness.

Later, when he goes up to bed, sticky with ice cream, she throws out the carton even though it is still half full. Outside, the microwave sits inert and smelling faintly of hot appliance. She goes upstairs and goes to bed in the other bedroom.

She tries to think of what to do. The Transglycyn is eating out the plaque, but he won't start to get better until they replace the neurons and the neurons grow and they don't even go to Atlanta until next month. It will be three months after that before she begins to see any improvement.

The old bastard. Alzheimer's is the bastard.

She doesn't know what to do. She can't even afford a leave of absence at work. Saturday, she thinks, she'll hire a sitter and then she'll rent a hotel room and sleep for a few hours. That will help. She'll think better when she's not so tired.

* * * *

At work, Mila's closest friend is Phyllis. Phyllis is also a quality engineer. More and more engineers in QA are women and Phyllis says that's why QA engineers make \$10,000 a year less than design and production engineers. "It's like Human Resources," she says. "It's a girl-ghetto of engineering now." 'Girl-ghetto' is a little ironic, coming from Phyllis who is 5'2", weighs close to 200 lbs, and who has close cut iron gray hair.

Phyllis comes by Mila's cubicle at midmorning and says, "So how's the old bastard." Phyllis knew Gus when he was still Gus.

"A real bastard," Mila says and looks up away from the computer monitor, up at Phyllis, the side of her

face all morning glory purple.

“Oh my God!” Phyllis says, “what happened?”

“Gus decked me.”

“Oh God,” Phyllis says. In the cafeteria, sitting with a cup of coffee in front of her she says dryly, “You really look quite amazing,” which is a relief, because Phyllis’ initial shock, her initial speechlessness was almost more than Mila could bear. If Phyllis can’t joke about it...

She does not say, ‘You’ve got to put him in a home.’ The other thing Phyllis does say is, “Gus would be appalled.”

“He would,” Mila says, so grateful. “He would, wouldn’t he.”

* * * *

They go to the Cleveland Clinic and Gus is anesthetized and some of his bone marrow is extracted. The frozen bone marrow is shipped to Atlanta so they can extract undifferentiated stem cells to inject in him to replace his own missing neurons.

After the anesthetic he is agitated for two days. His balance is off and his hip hurts where they extracted the bone marrow and he calls her a bitch.

Two weeks later they go to Atlanta and the procedure to inject the undifferentiated cells and virus trigger are almost identical to the first procedure. Gus swings at her twice more; once at the clinic in Atlanta and once back in the townhouse, but she’s watching because she’s afraid of him now, and she gets out of the way both times. She warns Iris, the new home health. (Cathy left because her boyfriend has a cousin in Tampa who can get him some sort of job.) Iris is in her thirties, heavy and not friendly. Not unfriendly. Iris says Gus never gets that way around her. Is she lying? Mila wonders. And then, why would she?

Is Iris saying that Gus likes Iris better than Mila? Mila always has the feeling that Iris thinks Mila should be home more. That Mila should be taking care of Gus herself.

Gus likes car rides, sometimes. They climb into her car.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“To therapy,” she says. He’ll start to get agitated now, she thinks.

But he puts the window down and the trees go past, and he leans his head back and croons.

“Are you happy, Saxophone Man?” Mila says.

Everything is in stasis now—he grows no better but no worse until something happens with the cells they put in his brain. Three months until they see any difference, at the earliest. But now, one month after they injected new cells into his gap ridden brain, they will do some tests to benchmark.

It all makes perfect sense. Too bad we never benchmark when we’re healthy, she thinks. Maybe she should have herself benchmarked. Mila Schuster, cognitive function raw scores at age fifty-one. Then if dementia got her in it’s jaws, they could chart the whole cycle. Hell, benchmark the whole population,

like they benchmark women with mammograms between the ages of forty-five and fifty.

Unless it has already started. She forgets things at work. She knows it is just because she is so worried about Alzheimer's. Senior moments, Allen, one of the Home Health used to call those times when you stand in the kitchen and can't remember what you came for.

If she got Alzheimer's, who would take care of her? She and Gus would end up in an institution, both in diapers and unaware of each other.

Gus croons.

“Saxophone Man,” she says. There is something dear to her about the ruined Gus, even through all the fear and the anger and the dismay. This great ruin of a fine brain. This engineer who could so often put his finger on a problem and say, ‘There. That's it. The higher the strength of the plastic in the handle, the more brittle it is. You want to back off on the strength a bit and let the thing flex or it's going to shatter. Particularly if it sits in sunlight and the UV starts breaking down the plastic.’

What a marvelous brain you had, she thinks. You'd say it and I'd see it, everybody would see it, obvious then. But everything is obvious once you see it.

The therapy is done at a place called Baobab Tree Rehab in a strip shopping mall. The anchor store in the mall is a Sears Hardware, which is Sears with just tools. Inside, Baobab Tree Rehab is like insurance companies and mortgage companies—there are ficus trees in pots in front of the windows, and rat's maze cubicles like there are in older office buildings. Once, years before, Gus was walking with Mila at work when suddenly he crouched a bit so he was her height—she is 5'3"—and said, it really is a maze for you. That was the first time she realized he could see over the tops of the cubicles, and so they didn't really work like walls for him.

Gus is looking over the cubicles now, too.

Their therapist is a young. She comes out to meet them. “Mr. Schuster, Mrs. Schuster, I'm Eileen.”

Mila likes that she talks to Gus. Gus may or may not care, but Mila figures it means that they think about things.

Eileen takes them back past the cubicles to a real room with a table on it. There are shelves on the wall.

“Mrs. Schuster,” she says, “I'd like you to sit in with us this first time.” Mila has not even thought about not sitting in, but now, suddenly she longs to be allowed to leave. She could go for a walk. Go take a nap. But Gus will probably get upset if she leaves him with a stranger.

And nearly everyone is a stranger.

Gus sits down at the table, bemused.

Eileen takes a puzzle with big wooden pieces off of the shelves and says, “Mr. Schuster? Do you like to do puzzles?”

Gus says, “No.”

Did Gus like to do puzzles? Isn't engineering a kind of puzzle? Mila can't remember Gus ever doing

regular puzzles—but they were so busy. Their life wasn't exactly conducive to sitting down and doing puzzles. Gus built telescopes for awhile. And then he built model rockets. He made such beautiful rockets. He would sit in front of the television and sand the rocket fins to get the perfect airfoil shape, saw dust falling into a towel on his lap, and then he would glue them to the rocket body using a slow setting epoxy, and finally, when they were about set, he'd dip his finger in rubbing alcohol and run it down the seam to make the fillet smooth and perfect. He made beautiful rockets and then shot them off, risking everything.

“Let's try a puzzle,” Eileen says.

* * * *

“Mila?” It is Gus on the phone.

“I'll get back to you,” Mila tells Roger. Roger is the manufacturing engineer on the project she's working on.

“Look,” Roger says, “I just need a signature and I'll get out of your hair—”

“It's *Gus*,” Mila says.

“Mila, honey,” Roger says, “I'm sorry, but I've got four thousand parts in IQA.” He wants her to sign off on allowing the parts to be used, even though they're not quite to spec, and she's pretty sure he's right that they can use them. But her job is to be sure.

“Mila,” Gus says in her ear, “I think I've got bees in my head.”

Roger knew Gus. And Roger is a short-sighted bastard who doesn't care about anything but four thousand pieces of ABS plastic pieces. Actually Roger is just doing his job. Roger is thorough.

“I promise it's okay,” Roger says. “I assembled twenty of them, they worked fine.”

Mila signs.

“Mila?” Gus says. “Can you hear me? I think I've got bees in my head.”

“What do you mean, honey,” she says.

“It itches in my head.”

Gus isn't supposed to feel anything from the procedures. There aren't nerve endings in the brain, he can't be feeling anything. It's been four months since the second procedure.

“It itches in your head,” Mila says.

“That's right,” Gus says. “Can you come pick me up? I'm ready to go home now.”

Gus is at home, of course, with Iris, the home health. But if Mila says that he's at home, Gus will get upset. “I'll be there in awhile to pick you up. Let me talk to Iris.”

“My head itches,” Gus says. “Inside.”

“Okay, honey,” Mila says. “Let me talk to Iris.”

Gus doesn't want to give the phone to Iris. He wants ... something. He wants Mila to take care of this head itching thing, or whatever it is that's going on. Mila doesn't know what Gus knows about the procedure. Maybe he's sort of pieced this together to get her to come and take him home. Maybe something strange is going on. It is an experimental procedure. Maybe this is just more weird Alzheimer's behavior. Maybe he has a headache and this is what he can say.

“It's bees,” he says.

Finally he lets her talk to Iris.

“Does he have a temperature? Does anything seem wrong?” she asks Iris.

“No,” says Iris. “He's real good today, Mrs. Schuster. I think that brain cells are growing back because he's really good these last couple of days.”

“Do I need to come home?” Mila asks.

“No ma'am. He just insisted on calling you. I don't know where the bees thing comes from, he didn't say that to me.”

Maybe the tissue in his head is being rejected. It shouldn't be. The cells are naïve stem cells. They're from his own body. Maybe there was a mistake.

When she gets home he doesn't mention it.

Sitting across from him at the dinner table, she can't decide if he's better or not. Is he handling a fork better?

“Gus?” she says. “Do you want to look at some photographs after dinner?”

“Okay,” he says.

She sits him down on the couch and pulls out a photo album. She just grabs one, but it turns out to be from when Dan was in first grade. “There's Dan,” she says. “There's our son.”

“Uh huh,” Gus says. His eyes wander across the page. He flips to the next page, not really looking.

So much is gone. If he does get smarter, she'll have to teach him his past again.

There is a picture of Dan sitting on a big pumpkin. There is someone, a stranger, off to one side, and there are rows of pumpkins, clearly for sale. Dan is sitting with his face upturned, smiling the over-big smile he used to make every time his picture was being taken. He looks as if he is about six.

Mila can't remember where they took the picture.

What was Dan that year for Halloween? She used to make his costumes. Was that the year he was the knight? And she made him a shield and it was too heavy to carry, so Gus ended up carrying it? No, because she made the shield in the garage in the house on Talladega Trail, in the garage, and they didn't

move there until Dan was eight. Dan had been disappointed in the shield, although she couldn't remember why. Something about the emblem. She couldn't even remember the emblem, just that the shield was red and white. She had spent hours making it. It had been a disaster, although he had used it for a couple of years afterwards, playing sword fight in the front yard.

How much memory did anybody have? And how much of it was even worth keeping?

“Who is that?” Gus asks, pointing.

“That's my mother,” Mila says. “Do you remember my mother?”

“Sure,” Gus says, which doesn't mean anything. Then he says, “Cards.”

“Yeah,” Mila says. “My mother played bridge.”

“And poker,” Gus says. “With Dan.”

The magpie mind, she thinks. He can't remember where he lives but he can remember that my mother taught Dan to play poker.

“Who is that?” he asks.

“That's our neighbor on South Bend,” Mila says. Thankfully, his name is written next to the photo. “Mike. That's Mike. He was a volunteer fireman, remember?”

Gus isn't even looking at the photos. He's looking at the room. “I think I'm ready to go home now,” he says.

“Okay,” she says. “We'll go home in a few minutes.”

That satisfies him until he forgets and asks again.

* * * *

Dan comes in the door with his suitcase. “It's nice, mom,” he says. “It's really nice. The way you talked I thought you were living in a project.”

Mila laughs, so delighted to see him, so grateful. “I didn't say it was that bad.”

“It's plain,” he says, his voice high to mimic her, “it's just a box, but it's all right.”

“Who's there?” Gus calls.

“It's me, dad. It's Dan.” His face tightens with ... worry? Nervousness, she decides.

“Dan?” his dad says.

“Hi dad,” he says. “It's me, Dan. Your son.” He is searching his father's face for recognition.

It is one of Gus's good days, and Mila has only a moment of fear before Gus says, “Dan. Visiting. Hello.” And then in that astonishingly normal way he sometimes does, “How was your flight?”

Dan grins. "Great, dad, it was great."

Is it the treatment that makes Gus remember? Or is it just one of those odd moments?

Dan is home for Christmas. It's his Christmas gift for her, he says, to give her a break. It's no break because she's been cleaning and trying to buy presents off the net. Thank God for the net. She's bought Dan cookbooks and cds, a beautiful set of German knives that he's always wanted but would never get because he never cooks at home. She's spent way too much money, but what would she buy Gus? She's bought Gus chocolates for a palate gone childlike. A couple of warm bright shirts. A puzzle.

"I can't believe you're here," she says, and she can feel her face stretched too wide.

"I'm here," he says. "Of course I'm here. Where else would I be? Lisa says hello."

Lisa is the new girlfriend. "You could have brought her," Mila says.

Gus stands there, vacant and uninterested.

Dan says, "Dad, I've met a really nice girl." She's told Gus about Lisa, but mostly it's to hear her own chatter and because Gus seems soothed by chatter. Whether the magpie left of his mind has noticed the name, she doesn't know.

"I didn't bring her," Dan says. "I thought I would be enough disruption."

Gus doesn't even appear to try to follow the conversation.

"I'll show you your room," Mila says. She's putting Dan in the guest room, which means she'll have to sleep with Gus. This week he has been going to sleep at ten or even earlier. And sleeping until early morning, say, five or six. That, she thinks, has to be the treatment.

* * * *

On Christmas Eve, Dan makes a fabulous feast. On Christmas Eve they used to eat roast beef, and then on Christmas day they'd eat roast beef sandwiches all day, but in the last few years she's made just a normal meal for the two of them. Dan makes a Christmas roast and Yorkshire pudding. There's pureed chestnuts and roasted potatoes and a salad with pomegranate and champagne dressing. "For desert," he says, "creme brulee. I borrowed a torch from Corot's." He brandishes a little handheld torch like the ones in the William's Sonoma catalogue. "This is going to be the best Christmas ever!" he cackles, which has been his joke for years, an ironic reference to all those Christmas television specials.

Gus does a puzzle. He has been doing them in therapy and the therapist (a different one than the first one, who is now on maternity leave) says that there are definite signs that the cells are grafting, filling in. Gus likes puzzles. She buys the ones for children 8 to 12. Cannonball Adderly is on the cd player. The tightness in her eases a bit. Christmas has never been a time for good things to happen, not in her experience. Too much at stake, she always supposed. All those expectations of the best Christmas ever.

But at this moment she is profoundly grateful.

"Do you need help?" she calls into the kitchen. Dan has told her she isn't allowed in on pain of death.

“No,” Dan calls out.

The smell of beef drippings is overwhelming. She has been living on microwaveable dinners and food picked up at the grocery where they have already cooked stuff to take home and eat and Chinese take out.

“Why'd you get rid of the microwave?” Dan asks from the kitchen.

“It shorted out,” Mila says.

Gus doesn't look up from his puzzle. Does he remember that evening at all? That was after his brain was scrubbed out, so it isn't something he would have lost. But did he ever have it? Does he know what he is living through, moment to moment, or is it like sand?

“Are you in there?” she whispers.

At six o'clock, there is more food than three people could ever eat in a month. Dan has sliced the beef and put beautifully finished slices on their plates. (Gus's is cut up, she notices, and her eyes fill with gratitude.) The beef is cook beautifully, and sits in a brown sauce with a swirl of horseradish. There is a flower cut out of carrot sitting on bay leaves on her plate and on Dan's—Gus's has the flower, but no bay leaf to mistake for food. The salad glistens and the pomegranate berries are like garnets. There is wine in her glass and in Dan's—Gus's glass has juice.

“Oh, my,” she breathes. It's a dinner for grown-ups in a place that has never seen anything but microwave dinners and Chinese take-out. “Oh, Dan,” she says. “It's so beautiful.”

“It had better be,” Dan says. “It's what I do for a living.”

“Gus,” she says. “Come eat Dan's dinner.”

“I'm not hungry,” Gus says.

“Come and sit with me while I eat, then.”

Sometimes he comes and sometimes he doesn't. Tonight he comes and she guides him to his seat.

“It's Christmas Eve, dad,” Dan says. “It's roast beef for Christmas Eve dinner.” She wants to tell him not to try so hard, to just let Gus make his own way, but he has worked so hard. Please, no trouble, she thinks.

“Roast beef?” Gus says. He takes his fork and takes a bite. “It's good,” he says. She and Dan smile at each other.

Mila takes a bite. “Where did you get this meat?” she asks.

“Reider's Stop and Shop,” Dan says.

“No you didn't,” she says.

“Sure I did,” Dan says. “You've just cooked so many years you don't remember how it tastes when you've just been smelling. I got all my cooking talents from you, mom.”

Not true. He is his father over again, with the same deep thoughtfulness, the same meticulousness. It is always a puzzle, cooking. She cooked as a hobby. Dan cooks with the same deep obsessiveness that Gus brought to model rockets.

“I don't like that,” Gus says.

“What?” Dan says.

“That.” Gus points to the swirl of horseradish. “It's nasty.”

“Horseradish?” Dan says. “You always liked horseradish.”

Gus had made a fetish of horseradish. And wasabi and chilies and ginger. He liked licorice and kimchee and stilton cheese and everything else that tasted strongly.

“It's nasty,” Gus says.

“I'll get you some without,” Mila says, before Dan fights. Never contradict, she thinks at Dan. It's not important. “He's not used to strong tastes anymore,” she says quickly to Dan, hoping Gus won't pay attention, that she won't have to explain.

“I'll get it,” Dan says. “You sit.”

Dan brings a plate. “What have you been eating, Dad?” he asks. “Cottage cheese? Mom, shouldn't he be getting tastes to, I don't know, stimulate him?”

Gus frowns.

“Don't,” she says. It's hard enough without Dan making accusations.

Gus has retreated from all but the bland. He eats like a three year old might. Macaroni and cheese. Grilled cheese sandwiches. Tomato soup. Ice cream. And she's let him because it was easy. She thinks about telling him that Gus has hit her. That they have been getting through the days.

Maybe inviting Dan was a mistake. Gus needs routine, not disruption.

“How's that, Dad?” Dan says.

“Good,” Gus says. Gus eats the roast beef without horseradish, the potatoes, the chestnut puree. He cleans out the ramekin of crème brulee with his index finger while Dan sits, smiling and bemused.

And then, full, he goes upstairs and goes to bed in his clothes. After an hour she goes up and takes off his shoes and covers him up. He sleeps, childlike and serene, until almost seven on Christmas morning.

* * * *

“I'm getting better,” Gus announces after therapy one day in February.

“Yes,” Mila says, “you are.” He goes to therapy three times a week now, and does the kind of things they do with children who have sensory integration problems. Lots of touching and moving. Evenings

after therapy he goes to bed early, worn out.

“I remember better,” he says.

He does, too. He remembers, for instance, that the townhouse is where they live. He doesn't ask to go home, although he will say that he wishes they still lived in the other house. She is not sure that there is not some small bit of recrimination in this announcement.

* * * *

“Do you want to go out to eat?” she asks one evening. They haven't gone out to eat in, oh, years. She is out of the habit.

She decides on Applebee's, where the food is reassuringly bland. These days, Gus might be someone who had a stroke. He no longer looks vacant. There is someone there, although sometimes she feels as if the person there is a stranger.

After dinner at Applebee's she takes him to rent a DVD. He wanders among the racks of DVDs and stops in the area of the store where they still have video tapes. “We used to watch these,” he says.

“We did,” she says. “With Dan.”

“Dan is my son,” he says. Testing. Although as far as she can tell he's never forgotten who Dan is.

“Dan is your son,” she agrees.

“But he's grown,” Gus says.

“Yes,” she says.

“Pick a movie for me,” he says.

“How about a movie you used to like?” She picks out *Forbidden Planet*. They had the tape until she moved them to the townhouse. She got rid of all of Gus' old tapes when they moved because there wasn't enough room. He had all the *Star Wars* tapes include the lousy ones. He had all the *Star Trek* movies, and *2001*, *Bladerunner*, *Back to the Future I* and *III*.

“This is one of your favorites,” she says. “You made a model of the rocket.”

Dan when was a kid he loved to hear about when he was a baby, and Gus is that way now about what he was like ‘before.’ He turns the DVD over and over in his hands.

At home he puts it in the player and sits in front of the screen. After a few minutes he frowns. “It's old,” he says.

“It's in black and white,” she says.

“It's dumb,” he says. “I didn't like this.”

She almost says, *It was your favorite*. They watched it when they were dating, sitting on the couch together. He had shown her all his science fiction movies. They'd watched *Them* on television. But she

doesn't, doesn't start a fight. When he gets angry he retreats back into Alzheimer's behavior, restless and pacing and then opaque.

She turns on the TV and runs the channels.

“Wait,” he says, “go back.”

She goes back until he tells her to stop. It's a police show, one of the kind everyone is watching now. It's shot three camera live and to her it looks like a cross between *Cops* and the old sitcom *Barney Miller*. Part of the time it's sort of funny, like a sitcom, and part of the time it's full of swearing and idiots with too many tattoos and too few teeth.

“I don't like this,” she says.

“I do,” Gus says. And watches the whole show.

* * * *

She lets the home health go.

Iris quit to go to another agency, Mila doesn't know why, and then they got William. Luckily by the time they got William it was okay if Gus was alone sometimes because William never got there before eight-thirty and Mila had to leave for work before eight. William was an affable and inept twenty-something, but Gus seemed to like him. Because William was a man instead of a woman?

Gus says, “Thank you for putting up with me,” and William smiles.

“I'm so glad you got better, Mr. Schuster,” he says. “I never left before because a patient got better.”

“You helped a lot,” he says.

Gus can stay by himself. There's so much he doesn't know these days, among the strange things that he does. But he can follow directions. The latest therapist—they have had four in the ten months Gus has been going, and the latest is a patient young man named Chris—the latest therapist says that Gus has the capacity to be pretty much normal. It's just a matter of re-learning. And he is re-learning as if he was actually much younger than he is, because of those new neurons forming connections.

There is some concern about those new neurons. Children form more and more connections until they hit puberty, and then the brain seems to sort through the connections and weed out some and reinforce others, to make the brain efficient in other ways. Nobody knows what will happen with Gus. And of course, the cause of the Alzheimer's still lurks somewhere. Maybe in ten years he'll start to deteriorate again.

“I am so grateful to you,” he says to Mila when William is gone. “You have been through so much for me.”

“It's okay,” she says. “You'd do the same for me.” Although she doesn't know what Gus would do. She doesn't know if she likes this new Gus. This big child.

“I would do the same for you,” he says.

“Are you sure you wouldn't stick me in some nursing home?” she says. “Only come visit me once a month?” She tries to make her tone broad, broad enough for anyone to see this comment as a joke.

But Gus doesn't. Teasing distresses him. “No,” he says now, “I promise, Mila. I would look after you the way you looked after me.”

“I know, honey,” she says. “I was just joking.”

He frowns.

“Come on,” she says. “Let's look at your homework.”

He is studying for his G.E.D. It's a goal he and the therapist came up with. Mila wanted to say that Gus not only had a degree in engineering, he was certified, but of course that was the old Gus.

He's studying the Civil War, and Mila checks his homework before he goes to his G.E.D. class.

“I think I want to go to college,” he says.

“What do you want to study?” she asks. She almost says, ‘Engineering?’ but the truth is he doesn't like math. Gus was never very good at arithmetic, but he was great at conceptual math—algebra, calculus, differential equations. But now he doesn't have enough patience for the drill in fractions and square roots.

“I don't know,” he says. “Maybe I want to be a therapist. I think I want to help people.”

Help me, she thinks. But then she squashes the thought. He is here, he is getting better. He is not squatting in the hollyhocks. She's not afraid of him anymore. And if she doesn't love him like a husband anymore, well, she still loves him.

“What was that boy's name?” Gus says, squinting down the street.

He means the home health.

For a moment she can't think and her insides twist in fear. It has started happening recently, when she forgets she feels this sudden overwhelming fear. Is it Alzheimer's?

“William,” she says. “His name is William.”

“He was a nice boy,” Gus says.

“Yes,” Mila says, her voice and face calm but her heart beating too fast.