

## GETTING SIGNAL

When Chandra came out of her coma, she asked Mark where she had been. “I mean, where did my consciousness go?”

“Out the window and down Eighth Avenue,” he said, smiling.

“I mean it,” she said, looking into his red-rimmed eyes.

“Babe, relax. You made it,” he said, as though this was all she needed to know. “You’re going to be OK.”

“Yes, OK,” she said, and knew she had to stop asking such questions. She was calm, actually, and found it a bit surprising to have nearly everyone she loved looking haggard here in the unfamiliar setting of a hospital room. She felt sorry for what they had gone through while she was away – wherever that might have been -- while her body had been in this bed. She tried to remember movies and TV dramas that might give her clues as to what was expected of her.

“Thanks for those stunning chrysanthemums,” she said, wondering why anyone would have dyed them that loathsome color.

Weeks after she was out of the hospital, she and Mark fell into their old habit of bickering about what series to watch. She took this as a good sign, but he spoiled it by quickly deferring to her, treating her like an invalid.

She turned the TV off.

“I said OK, we can watch what you want.”

“Mark, did I *say* anything while I was out? You know, like talking in my sleep?”

“Not a word. Can we not talk about this? That’s over, thank God. Why look back?”

“It’s not as though it was just some money I lost, or, I don’t know, my keys, my diaphragm . . . It’s my awareness that’s missing, a chunk of my life.”

“Babe, it’s like asking where our minds go when we sleep. Can’t you please just let it go?”

She didn’t answer, she was absorbed in wondering what the dreams of the unconscious are like, or if they dream at all. It was useless to ask her doctor: he was just as upset by such questions as Mark was.

“The doctor said you’re going to be OK, right? He did say that,” he asked.

“And the physical therapist, too. And the guy at the bodega that you overshare with.”

“Yeah, you are, you’re making good progress,” he reassured himself. “The best possible. I’m sure of it.”

Her office was generous with sick leave; she had plenty of time to consider the question. They say some unconscious people hear the people talking around them. She tried hard to remember if she had heard such voices, but could retrieve nothing. No matter how she looked at it, unconsciousness was inconceivable.

She tried to keep her research hidden, but then Mark found her up at two in the morning, sitting in the glare of her laptop screen, reading about the Hard Problem. He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. “Babe, sweetheart, we need to tell the doctor about this.”

“Mark, I know you think I’m crazy. Please listen to me.”

She told him about David Chalmers and how the material machinery of the brain cannot explain consciousness, and how Tom Stoppard’s play on the problem dodges it completely by implying God just makes it so.

He asked no questions and she took this to mean he was not listening. His head was resting on hers. She felt his tears on her scalp.

“I want you to be thinking about us running out of toothpaste and how to avoid dinner with the Wheelers,” he said. “Normal, usual, healthy things.”

She found it annoying that he might be right to be worried and even more annoying that her headache was interfering with her research. She gave it up for the night, but as soon as Mark left for the office in the morning, she fired her laptop right back up, only to have it lose connection. It was on, then it was off. She checked the modem, turned it off, turned it on, repeat. She decided to give it a rest. Hot tea and the distraction of a radio talk show was in order. The water came to a boil on schedule and she changed the sports channel Mark had set on the radio to her usual NPR. The narrow slice of being she cozied into was as orderly as the diagram of the brain that her doctor had used to explain how the injury had precipitated her coma. How neatly his explanation covered the whole thing, except what mattered most to her.

Then static drowned out the radio. She turned the dial. Noise. Then nothing. Then a cheery voice reporting a “good news story,” straining to neutralize all the bad ones, cut off in the middle of an uplifting finale.

She checked the laptop. The same: nothing, or, depending on how you looked at it, the same nothing. Her phone had a faltering signal. She managed to reach Mark, whose office was only three blocks away. “Are you getting a steady signal?”

“We’re talking aren’t we? Listen, Babe, I think I’m going to have to call the doctor and – “  
Cut off.

She unplugged the laptop and plugged it back in. It connected just fine and she began to relax. Why had she gotten so keyed up? She should have taken one of those luscious little calming pills her doctor had given her.

The screen went blank.

Where was that cheery radio announcer when you needed her? What would she recommend? A nap? A soak in the tub?

It was a sunny summer day, and she decided to take a relaxing drive. It would be her first drive alone. She knew Mark would go batshit at first when she told him. But maybe after that he would recognize that had she managed it, and stop hovering.

Her hands were sweaty on the steering wheel and her breathing was tight, but she kept going. She drove all the way out to the suburbs and was re-gaining her confidence. She reached to push the radio button, but stopped herself. What if there was no reception? It would freak her out.

There were bound to be some cars with radios on and windows down, like hers; people who preferred a fresh breeze over air-conditioning. She knew it was silly, but she wasn't going to press that button until she could confirm a signal. All the cars she approached had their windows closed as tight as the ones sealed in skyscrapers.

She found herself in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Face it, she told herself, I'm lost. She would have to rely on Seri to get home, and that required signal. She had enough of this. It was time to turn around and try to find her way back. She saw a line of cars waiting to give their orders to a box on a pole, and decided to give it one last try.

Yes, oh yes! A man was leaning out of his car to place his order and she could hear a disk jockey and radio music! It was a beautiful day with a song pouring out and there was nothing amiss with the world beyond her own stupidity for making so much out of nothing. She reached for her radio once, twice, without hitting the button. Finally, on the third try, she found the courage to punch it on and, yes, music poured out with a familiar love lament. Seri was alive and well and directed her to the highway that would take her home. The moment after her sigh of relief, static drowned out the voice.

She didn't overreact. After all, she had already been through more trauma than most people ever experience and what doesn't kill you makes you – wait a minute, music is back on!

Then not.

She pulled over, panicking, and checked her phone. It was fully charged but not connected. Cars and trucks made a continuous rushing sound as though she was in a tunnel. It was afternoon rush hour traffic: it was much later than she thought. She pulled into a rest area and was theoretically safe, but she didn't feel safe. And she was too shaken to drive away. She advised herself to listen to her "rational mind" and imaged that if she had asked that cheery voice on the radio, she would be told to stay put and stay calm. She stayed put and aspired to calm. Mark would be home from work by now and find her absent. She sensed -- no, she knew -- he was thinking about her, wanting her, the total her, at that very moment.

The traffic noise was so loud, after a while it was hard to tell if she was hearing static and she didn't try to find out, she didn't turn off the radio, she didn't turn the dial. It was all a matter of signal and signal was everywhere, maybe not picked up by machines, but pervading everything alive, as ubiquitous as gravity. She could trust it, just as she surely as she could feel Mark thinking of her. There would come a time when she would be able to find a clear signal, she was sure of it.

THE END

