

"Please kill me."

These are the last words I heard when life was normal. Well, at least normal for the time.

*Normal.* What does that mean anyway? Normal had changed multiple times and at record speed over the last two years. I miss ordinary, but then again I also miss my husband. Now I'm sitting here wondering, in front of this fool in a neatly pressed lab coat, listening to bullshit medical jargon that is supposed to give me some sort of comfort.

"Mrs. McCullough, we discussed the risks. Unfortunately, medicine is not without side effects."

*Thanks. Whose money did you waste on this degree?*

I watched him while this supposed medical professional spouted off his routine. Sitting there, unnerved, Ryan's hard body fought against the arms of the soft leather chair, looking for escape. When was the last time he thought of me, I wonder. Ryan smiled shyly as I stared, his mind pondering the stranger seated to his right. He wouldn't recognize me if he tried. He hasn't remembered me since the trials started.

The ticking started slowly and on his left side. It was January, right after our wedding anniversary. It started simply - an ongoing stroke between his left thumb and forefinger; a silent agitation that meant no harm.

'Probably just anxiety,' said the first medical professional.

*My insurance paid good money for this?*

Progressions of movement always lead to regressions of life. Ryan was constantly fighting with his boss about the continuous disintegration of his work, the illegible tax documents, the missed deadlines. How it was costing the firm extra money on the Branson account because Ryan was 'taking his sweet time' getting all the paperwork in order. As such

'normal' became coming home late, fatigued and grieving, as we watched his livelihood slowly slip away. At first the writhing was controllable through sheer will, but after only a few months Ryan lost his voluntary domination, and he was thus left living an unintentional game of chess between the center part of his brain and the movement of his arm and leg.

His brain usually won.

At first, mentally, he was unchanged. The same man that earned multiple degrees, that knew several languages. He was the same man that fought for us, perseverating on our relationship in the beginning; calling me incessantly, begging me to give him a chance even though I was technically already spoken for. The same Ryan that talked me into the 'thrill' of sky-diving, holding our lives in strong embrace, creating a perfect sense of comfort and security against the pounds of pressured force on our bodies. Only a year and a half ago he was the man that mowed the lawn, repaired the leaky kitchen faucet, climbed ladders to hang Christmas lights, and completely other expected, stereotypical husbandly duties that I wished I had actually thanked him for. He was the man who could satisfy my sexual being; the self-sufficient, highly active, independent, selfless, *normal* man.

Normal changed for him when the endless pulsing of his hand kept him from keeping hold of his coffee cup. When he couldn't grasp his knife and fork properly, and he struggled with buttoning his jacket. His posture seemed to wither forward, the muscles in his back contorting him into an awkward side-bent, curved position. His writing became microscopic and more erratic in its alignment. His legs resorted to severely shortened, shuffling steps, causing him to fall multiple times at work, resorting to the use of a cane before his third decade. Then Ryan brought home his office in a box, and normal became erratic, submissive, and dependent.

At least there was, still, his memory.

“The medication is still in clinical trials, Mrs. McCullough. This is part of the research study. We likely won’t know the complete effects until many years from now.”

*No worries, we apparently have all the time in the fucking world.*

Ryan remained stoic in his posture, his broad shoulders and wide chest cast a shadow over the oak desk, and he began to shift quietly to un-wedge his hips and thighs from the tight compression of the chair, twisting his body in frustration. Over the last six months, his metabolism in overdrive, Ryan built his body frame into the goliath he was meant to be. In addition to his daily cocktail of newly developed Dopamine replacement medication, the doctors prescribed protein powder and iron pills, which gave him the energy and endurance to rebuild his muscle girth and bone mass into an advanced structure, well beyond the typical frame for a healthy, adult male. Daily trips to the gym, completing half marathons, lifting weights like a goliath. Ryan had become a quasi-superhero, released after months of confinement. I sensed that Ryan was annoyed that his day was being interrupted without his permission, and that his exercise routine was being delayed because of the overwhelmingly endless conversation between a tired, withered woman and an apathetic man in a white coat.

'Astonishing,' said the second medical professional.

*Oh, that's your word for it?*

Ryan was too young, they said, and the disease too advanced. Normal progression took years, even in the worst cases. *Normal*. He was such an anomaly that he’d become a sort of bizarre show for the neurology department – an elderly specimen displayed as the result of seemingly accelerated time. Unfortunately the MRI didn’t lie, and the persistent twisting and unyielding distortion of his limbs that the doctors saw first-hand only confirmed it. Parkinson’s disease had now confined the thirty year old man to a walker, his balance eliminated by the

extraneous movements, with the future of a wheelchair not far behind. Normal became bathing my husband's shifting body, attempting to hold one of his arms firmly while sponging the other. Dressing, feeding, shaving, brushing. Positioning him in his chair, moving the bedroom to the first floor so to avoid the disaster of having to climb stairs. Ordinary became helping him toilet, supporting his frail skeleton, cleaning personal areas, a difficulty even for the closest of couples. Normal become crying in frustration, embarrassment, and heartbreak.

Ryan's body atrophied and the disease confined him to bed. There, in the place where we made love so many times before, in the place we use to fall asleep holding one another. In the place we tried for a baby, an option no longer plausible. There, in the spot that served most people as the foundation of marriage, where we awoke to each other's bad breath and disheveled appearance. There, in that same small, firm space, Ryan slowly perished. The perpetual movement was just enough to be constantly fatiguing but not enough to prevent pressure sores. Death was awaiting him on a ten-year-old, cheap mattress. In the same place where we still loved one another, where Ryan recognized me, where our memories still harmonized. His thick, brown hair was damp and matted from sweating, and, despite my best efforts on daily cleansing, a sustained odor of decay emitted from his flesh. He whimpered, his bony shoulders, shuddering softly.

"Anna," he whispered. "I love you."

Then, after a deep, rasping breath, he spoke again.

"Please kill me."

I would have done anything to stop his agony. I couldn't look at this tortured soul and allow him to succumb in such a manner. I couldn't watch him waste away, his middle-brain

starving his body into lifelessness. I couldn't watch the life of the man I loved being cruelly stripped into a hollow void by an invisible disease.

I promised Ryan that I would end his suffering.

“In theory, Mrs. McCullough, the medicine worked – it did what it was meant to do. Ryan is living a stable life now. The part of his brain that could not control his movements is working again. Despite the fact that the decision-making part has been slightly affected, with ongoing routines and assistance he will continue to develop into a fully-functioning independent individual once again.”

*Oh, so he's 'normal' again?*

The third medical professional sat back in his chair and thought for a moment before he continued.

“In reality, I am unsure why the medication suppressed his memory function. With every patient we have studied thus far there have been different side effects. You have to understand that Ryan is a rare case – everything about his diagnosis is, by medical standards, implausible. Everything that has happened as the result of treatment is astounding. We didn't really know what we were dealing with; in the twenty-five years I have been practicing, I've never seen anything like it. You have to have some patience, Mrs. McCullough. We are lucky the medication worked at all.

"The memory loss - it could be temporary, you know. His memory may come back with time.”

He paused briefly, then continued, sensing my overzealous optimism.

“But, then again, it may not,” he said.

*Thanks again for your expert advice.*

He leaned forward, almost whispering.

“Do you understand what I am saying, Mrs. McCullough? You were successful. You ended his misery. The parts of his brain that was affected by the disease are no longer deteriorating. You fought the good battle and won. The side effect is unexpected and unfortunate, but you made the right decision.”

He sat waiting for a response, staring at me as the thoughts in my head shouted out from the fucking leather chair across that goddamn ridiculous, over-priced, oak desk.

*You are quite proud aren't you? Proud of your treatment, proud of your science! Proud that you were able to come across such a case, make such an abnormality so normal! It doesn't matter that my life has left me, that I have no reason for being! It doesn't matter that the past five years of our lives are gone, as long as he can walk down the damn stairs and wipe his own ass!*

The tears come heavy now, as silence carried on.

*It doesn't matter that I miss my husband. That all our memories have disappeared, that my sanity has been replaced with confusion and sorrow. I had to watch his loss of will, the battle with his own body! The weakening of his flesh, the emergence of a seemingly human carcass. I had to watch his pain, his deteriorating sense of self. I had to hear his desire to end life early! He actually asked me to kill him - do you know that? He asked me to live with that guilt. I want to be selfish, just this once – to have the man back that I married. Instead I have lost the man sitting right next to me. That my normal is abnormal now. Thank you, sir, you've been overwhelmingly unhelpful. Thank you for your medical expertise!*

The third medical professional then offered one other abrupt suggestion, though insulted at having to present the choice.

“There is always the option of taking him off the medications, Mrs. McCullough. The chances are good that his memory will return fully, as he hasn’t been on the medication that long.”

I looked toward Ryan who continued to offer his blank, smiling gesture. He resonated perfection, an angelic figure, like the year before treatment was some nightmarish fantasy. All his memories of writhing in pain, feeling shame for his condition, growing old so suddenly, had vanished. Like the day was just another day – as if he was going to wake up the next morning and feed the dog or take out the trash or put up the goddamn Christmas lights. As I comprehended his fortunate circumstance, his newest 'normal', the memories flooded: his proposal at Central Park, our wedding day, those three nights in Boca. Birthdays and New Year's Eve parties; champagne toasting, wine-and-dining. The lake house, camping, the cruise to the Bahamas. The nights he held me when I lost my mother. His scent, his speech, his softness. The happiness that came with five years of loving him.

The promise was regrettable, but my humanity perseveres. There was no going back to our normal.

“Dr. Benson, what choice do I have?”