

The Visitor

I sit, leaning forward on the vinyl orange chair beside the bed, watching my father. His eyes are closed, his breathing loud and uneven. The only sound in the room, aside from his raspy breath, is the rhythmic beeping of the monitor by his bed. Blip...blip...blip. I find the measured cadence of the beeping strangely comforting, as if everything will be okay as long as his heart, his pulse, can keep time to this simple rhythm. I unconsciously tap my fingers on the chair's metal armrest. Tap, blip. Tap, blip. Tap, blip. I glance at the monitor, where the inner workings of his body are recorded in neon green, to see what it might reveal. The jagged lines moving across the screen are sharp-edged, forceful, insistent -- like he used to be. Now he looks diminished, almost as if he isn't here.

I remember when his presence filled the house. Jake and I would be sitting at the dinner table, eating one of Mom's latest culinary experiments -- tuna casserole topped with crumpled potato chips a la *Better Homes and Gardens*, maybe, or "Ants on a Hill," a dish involving a mound of Chinese noodles, bits of chopped meat, and green peas, courtesy of a short stint Mom did at a Chinese cooking school.

"Mr. Morgan is so unfair," I'd lament to Jake, who had had the same teacher two years before I did. "He made the whole class stay in for recess to take a surprise quiz

because Bobby Costello told a dirty joke and made everyone laugh when we were supposed to be reading.”

“Mr. Morgan is a douche bag,” Jake would have answered, eliciting a sharp “Jake—language!” from Mom, who would be doing dishes, and a loud guffaw from me. We’d hear Dad’s key in the door and we’d bound out of our chairs, full of expectation, racing to greet him.

“My boys,” he’d bellow, his voice filling up the foyer, reaching into the living room, back into the kitchen, up the stairway and into my parents’ bedroom, where it would inevitably rouse Henry, our golden retriever, who would have been – up until that moment -- dozing on my parents’ massive bed. Dad would drop his briefcase and give us each a congenial pat on the back, or maybe a playful tousle on the tops of our heads, and then Henry would come bounding down the steps and jump between us, as if even he were vying for my father’s attention.

“What’s cooking?” Dad would roar as he headed into the kitchen, the three of us at his heels. His heavy footsteps would make Mom’s delicate china tea cups – the ones perched on the glass shelves that stood against the side of the staircase – clatter in their saucers.

He’d join us for dinner – Mom would finally sit down, too -- and Jake and I would talk over each other in a rush to tell our dad things.

“Dad, we’re having Ants on a Hill.”

“Dad, you should have seen how far Mr. Flynn hit the baseball in gym today.”

“Dad, I got the highest grade in the class on my math test.”

“Dad, I got the fastest time for the mile.”

That was it. As soon as Jake mentioned one of his athletic accomplishments, Dad was hooked. I would turn to my plate sullenly, and move the ants around on the hill with my fork, as Jake engaged Dad in an animated discussion of his speed and prowess. Mom would be sure to congratulate me on the math test grade, and I'd give her a half-hearted smile. But my moment to gloat would have passed.

Night after night, it was the same damn thing. Night after night, Jake would station himself in center field, and I would fade into the background.

There is a young man across the hall – when the door to my father's room is open, I can see into his room. He, too, has tubes carrying fluids into and out of his body, and seems to spend much of the day sleeping. Every day I see his father – a wiry gray-haired man with kind eyes – sitting at his bedside, reading to his son. It doesn't seem to matter to the father that his son is not conscious; he just keeps reading, as if he is sure that his son can hear him.

The nurse comes in. She nods in my direction, checks the bags of fluid attached to the tubes attached to my father. She looks at one of the monitors, at her watch, and then back at the monitor. Sensing me watching her, she looks over at me again.

“Why don't you go get a cup of coffee or something?” she says softly. “It looks like he's probably going to be sleeping for a while.”

“That's okay,” I say. “I'm fine.” I didn't come all the way to the hospital – not to mention across the country -- so that I could leave while he's still asleep, so that he will not even know I am here. Even when he awakens, I know, he does not always remember

where he is; he does not always come out of his own head. Still, I'm determined to stay put until he wakes up, until he sees me.

"How was he yesterday?" I ask the nurse.

Mom had been with him most of the day before – and just about every other day – but I had convinced her to take the day off, to go get her nails done, or see her friends, or do some work in her garden. "I don't have anything going on – I'll spend the day," I had assured her. "This is what I came for." I was worried about Mom -- she never gave herself a break. She had sounded so worn out when I spoke to her on the phone the week before, that I had resolved to visit. I had been meaning to come for the past few months – but work had been busy, and I knew Jake was here, so I had put off booking a flight.

This week was supposed to have been a vacation week: Mara and I were initially intending to head down to Baja for a few days, but then Oliver, our labradoodle, was hit by a car, had to have surgery, and needed Mara to stay behind to care for him. So I decided to come see Dad. The truth is, I didn't mind getting away – I couldn't bear seeing Oliver, who was usually a maniac, looking all pathetic and subdued.

"He actually had a good couple of hours in the afternoon," the nurse answers. "He woke up and was pretty with it. Had a nice conversation with your mother...."

"Well, that's good to hear," I say, not knowing what else to ask. Even when I do have questions, no one seems to have the answers, anyway. I make a mental note to get some details from Jake; Mom and I are planning to go to his house, which is only two towns over, for dinner. I glance at the wall clock – it is 2:00pm. I settle back in my chair, making a feeble attempt to get comfortable.

"I'll be out here then," she says, heading back out the door.

On weekends, Dad used to take us to Home Depot. He liked to fix things around the house, and inevitably would need some tool or material with which to tackle his latest project. Jake and I loved accompanying him on these outings. We loved running up and down the aisles that seemed as long as football fields; we loved exploring the bins of screws, nuts, bolts and other assorted treasures; we loved trying out the different doorbells that were arranged haphazardly on a tall panel in the door aisle. Often, we'd persuade him to buy us some cool gadget, like a stainless steel hammer whose handle unscrewed to reveal a series of different sized screwdrivers, or a really bright flashlight that could be recharged by being stuck into the car's lighter.

But one Sunday, it was just my father and me making the trip to Home Depot – Jake was home with strep throat. I was so excited to have my father to myself that I could barely sit still in the car. When Jake was around, I was the youngest. But today I felt older, more important. Here we were, I recall thinking to myself, two guys going to Home Depot together. Dad was planning a big job for that day – he was going to replace the trim on our windows, which had been eaten away by carpenter ants. When we arrived at Home Depot, he headed straight for the wood aisle, a man on a mission. I followed quickly behind him, trying to mimic his purposeful stride. But I quickly lost interest in the wood trim and started wandering in and out of the aisles. I rang some of the doorbells; found an aisle full of paintbrushes and pretended I was painting my arms; counted how many steps it took to walk from one end of the store to the other. The store was so big, that I would lose track of what number I was up to, and have to start over. But without Jake to egg me on, I soon tired of these games and headed back to the wood aisle to see if

my father was almost done. At least, I thought I was heading back toward the wood aisle. But when I looked around me, nothing looked at all familiar.

I tried to retrace my steps, but came to an intersection of aisles and couldn't remember which direction I had originally come from. I looked up and saw a bird flying in the rafters, then was startled by the sound of a vehicle driving up the aisle behind me. I flattened myself against the shelves to avoid the boxes piled high on a metal flatbed that jutted out in front of the truck. I started to panic. I imagined my father, ready to go, getting angry when he couldn't find me. Perhaps he would shout my name impatiently, but the store was so noisy – with the loudspeaker constantly blaring announcements about specials and workshops – that I wouldn't be able to hear him, which would make him even more furious. I wondered at what point his fury would transform itself into concern – would he think that maybe someone had taken me? What would he tell Mom? He would have to call the store management, who might have to call the police, and all because I wandered off and didn't pay attention to where I was going. He'd never let me come with him again.

I decided that trying to find him was better than just standing there, so I crossed my fingers, on both my hands, and then my arms (a good luck maneuver that Jake and I referred to as “triple crossies”), and randomly chose an aisle to go down. It happened to be flanked by kitchen cabinets, which Jake and I would ordinarily open and inspect as we worked our way past – but on this day I kept my eyes focused in front of me as if I were wearing blinders, hoping to reach familiar ground at the end of the row. My sneakers made footprints in the sawdust that had settled on the floor, reminding me of Hansel and Gretel and their breadcrumbs. I finally emerged at a wide aisle that miraculously led to

the checkout counters. And there, piling assorted pieces of wood on the last counter, was Dad. I was simultaneously flooded with relief (I was found!) and fear (How would I explain my disappearance?).

“Hey buddy, ready to go?” asked my father, as if I had been at his side the entire time. He hadn’t even noticed that I was missing.

I dream that I’m running down a football field. I’ve somehow gotten around the defense and am out ahead of all the other players. I’m nearing the goal line and I glance over to the bleachers where I spot my father, but I don’t think he realizes that it’s me underneath the helmet. I try to pull the helmet off while I run, so that he will recognize that I am the one who is about to make the touchdown. He doesn’t see me.

My head jerks forward and I realize that I have dozed off. The sharp scent of alcohol, medicine, and disinfectant reminds me of where I am. I quickly look over at my father’s bed to make sure I haven’t missed anything. He’s still sleeping, his withered hand dangling over the side of the bed, lost in a tangle of tubes. Seeing that hand makes me feel like crying. It is so unlike the strong, capable hands that were adept at fixing things. Part of me has an urge to touch the hand, to make sure he is still here. If this was a movie, I think, I would take my father’s hand in mine, he would open his eyes, and there would be a touching emotional moment. But this isn’t a movie, and I don’t think I’ve held my father’s hand since I was six or seven. It would be an unnatural gesture.

For years, our weekends were spent at football fields, baseball fields, soccer fields, tracks. At first, when Jake and I were younger, we’d be out there together. Because

we were so close in age, we were often put on the same team, which made things much easier on my mother – our chauffer – but much harder on me. I wasn't a bad athlete. I could get on first base, could make an occasional goal, could pass a football. But I didn't shine the way Jake did. He was a natural. He'd hit home runs. He always got goals. He could outrun anyone.

“Attaboy Jake,” I'd hear my dad yelling from the stands as Jake tore across the field, brimming with excitement, enthusiasm, pride.

“Good job, Adam,” he'd say, patting my back half-heartedly, at the end of a game. By middle school, I was in the stands with my parents, watching Jake. I had found my own calling – I had discovered the saxophone, was playing in a jazz band at school, sometimes with some friends in our basement. The jazz band concerts were usually on Thursday nights, when Dad had late meetings.

You'd think I would have hated Jake, would have seen him as a rival. But the truth is, he was a great brother. We'd hang out a lot when my parents went out -- before I was old enough to go out on weekend nights with my friends, but not really old enough to stay alone – and though many brothers would have complained about having to stay home with a sibling, Jake wasn't like that. He never treated me like I was hampering his social life or lorded it over me that he was my “babysitter.” Instead, he acted like we were just two guys choosing to hang out on a Friday night. He wasn't embarrassed to take me to the movies at the shopping center around the corner, even though that's where all the middle-school and high-school kids hung out on weekend nights. Even when we'd meet up with girls in his grade, who would gather around him like he was a rock star. The

girls would hit his arm playfully when he said something funny, or fall into him, laughing – they were always finding ways to touch him.

“Hi Jake’s brother,” they would say, acknowledging my presence, trying to impress Jake. I would nod my head, but I wouldn’t say much. Even once I got to middle school, I rarely spoke to girls, didn’t know what to say or how to approach them. I was fairly content in my boy world; playing pool in buddies’ basements, mastering arcade games in the lobby of that same local movie theater, or attempting to put together some semblance of a garage band with my more musically-minded friends. Until eighth grade, that is, when Sara Levitt appeared in my biology class.

She had curly red hair, long locks of it that would fall gracefully behind her shoulders whenever she flicked her head to the side, which she did often. She would never volunteer in class, but whenever Mr. Baxter called on her, she would always know the answer. She would say it so quietly that you had to lean toward her to hear what she was saying. When she finished, her face would redden slightly, and she would look down at her desk. I found her modesty – and everything else about her – incredibly charming.

It took me three months to get up the courage to say hi to her. It was a Friday night, and my friends and I were playing Pac-man in the movie theater lobby, and she walked by with her posse of girlfriends, on their way into a film. I had spotted her on the popcorn line, and didn’t realize I was staring at her until one of her friends looked over at me and then nudged Sara, whispering something into her ear and giggling. Before I had a chance to look away, Sara looked up at me, so I waved. I would have died of embarrassment, except that she smiled shyly and waved back, before looking down at her popcorn and continuing into the movie. The next week, not only did Sara smile at me

across the room in biology, but one of her friends came up to me in the cafeteria – earning me the admiration of my equally girl-shy buddies -- and asked if my friends and I would be at the movies again the following Friday night. She said Sara wanted to know.

I floated through the rest of the day, and waited impatiently for Jake to come home from basketball practice so that I could tell him about my conquest. But when Jake came home, Mom intercepted him first. Mom ushered Jake into his room the second he walked in the door, but I could hear her voice from where I crouched at the bottom of the stairs, listening.

“I can’t believe you would betray our trust in you like this,” I heard Mom saying in a low but firm voice. “Did you really think Dad wouldn’t notice the missing vodka? How could you?” Jake muttered something in reply but I couldn’t make out what he said. Had Jake and his friends actually gone into my parents’ liquor cabinet? “Dad is *really* not happy,” my mother continued. “He is *so* disappointed in you. He said he will have a talk with you tonight about this, but I can tell you one thing – you can forget about playing any basketball this weekend.” This is how it worked in our house: Mom let us know we were in trouble, but Dad was the one who did the yelling and doled out the discipline.

I snuck into Jake’s room as soon as I heard Mom open Jake’s door and shut her own. His room was typically off-limits; usually, I wouldn’t dare to open his closed door, or even knock on it. I assumed the sign on the door – that read “Keep Out: That Means You” -- was directed at me. But this was big – Jake had been caught drinking! I didn’t know he had even tried alcohol. The prospect of my brother being *that* kind of kid both

thrilled and disturbed me. Had he gotten drunk? Did he like it? Had he done it before? I had to know.

Jake was sitting on the edge of his bed -- he didn't even acknowledge the fact that I had entered his sanctuary uninvited. I hung back by the door at first, quickly surveying his room, which had always held a certain mystique for me. It was so unlike my own room, a shrine to my past fixations. I had been an architect of all things Lego and an aficionado of all things electronic: My saxophone and prized jazz-record collection shared space on my bookshelves with a vast array of Lego constructions, old electronic devices in various states of deconstruction, and piles of video and computer-game boxes. Jake's room was dominated by a queen-size bed and a shaggy blue bean bag chair, both of which had seen quite a bit of action, if Jake could be believed. On his desk was a giant boom box our parents had given Jake for his 15th birthday – when I heard music by Earth, Wind, and Fire (Jake's "make-out music") emanating through the wall that divided our rooms, I knew Jake and whichever girl he had brought home to study with were not getting much homework done. Jake's shelves were crowded with trophies which reflected the orange-hued light from a lava lamp stationed next to his bed. Amidst the trophies were a prized basketball signed by Magic Johnson and a baseball inscribed with the letters MVP – he had been given the "game ball" after leading his team to victory in the all-states by hitting three home runs, the last one at the top of the ninth, with bases loaded.

"Adam, listen," Jake said, walking over to me and placing his hands solemnly on my shoulders. "I have to play in the game this Saturday. This is our biggest game of the

season – if I don't play, I have no chance of making varsity next year." I liked that he was confiding in me as if I were his equal, his peer.

"You know Dad is going to ground you for the weekend – *at least*," I said.

"What did you guys drink? Did it taste gross?"

Jake looked at me condescendingly and I was embarrassed about my question.

But I couldn't help it; I wanted details.

"Did you get really drunk?"

"It doesn't matter," said Jake. "I just can't be grounded. Not this weekend."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Adam, I need you to do me a really big favor," he said slowly. I could not imagine what he was going to ask me, but I got a funny feeling in my stomach. "I need you to confess that it was you and your friends."

"What?" How could he ask me this? "No way," I said emphatically. "Can't you just explain to Dad that your friends were pressuring you or something? Tell him how important the game is..."

"You know him," Jake said. "He won't bend on this – if he decides that I need to be grounded for the weekend, then there's no changing his mind. It wouldn't matter if I were competing in the Olympics."

I wanted to help him. But I didn't want my parents to think that I was drinking. I didn't want Dad, especially, to think poorly of me. Particularly when I had done nothing wrong. If he thought I stole his liquor, that I was drinking with my friends, he would never respect me again. Jake would be the shining star and I would be the disappointment. I couldn't bear it.

And, Sara Levitt was going to be at the movies on Friday night. If I did what Jake asked, I could miss what could be the most significant moment in my thus far uneventful romantic life.

“I wouldn’t ask you this if it wasn’t so, so important to me,” Jake said. “You can just say that they talked you into it – they know you never get into any trouble, they’ll forget about it. It’s just that Dad just gave me this whole lecture about drugs and drinking and being serious about my sports and taking care of my body – he’ll never forgive me. And, I’m telling you, if I don’t play in this game, I’m finished in basketball – I’ll be a career JV’er.”

I didn’t know what to do. Jake looked at me pleadingly. He got down on his knees and held his hands together in supplication, which normally would have made me laugh, but at this moment just made me more distraught and conflicted. I wanted Jake to be pleased with me, but it hurt me that he would ask me to take the fall for him.

Jake stood up and looked me in the eye. “Please, Adam,” he said seriously. “I’ll never forget it if you do this for me.”

I gave in. I took a verbal beating from Dad, who, after lecturing me, just shook his head and walked away. The head-shaking was worse than the lecturing – it was like he was giving up on me. Mom just gave me a funny look when I “confessed,” as if she couldn’t quite believe it. I was grounded for two weekends, not just one. Jake thanked me profusely, said he “owed me big time.”

When I was in bed that night, I heard Dad’s voice through the wall. He was speaking to Jake. Apologizing for falsely accusing him. Saying that he was a good

brother for trying to take the fall for me. That he hoped I would learn to follow my big brother's example.

Jake and I don't talk much anymore. I call him on his birthday, and he is always genuinely happy to hear from me; I can hear it in his voice. His birthday is in January, smack in the middle of the frigid New England winter, so he usually makes some comment like "What I wouldn't give to be in that California sunshine about now, you lucky dog," and I always suggest that he and his kids come out to visit, and he always says "I'll take you up on that some day." But he never does.

His kids spent some time out here last September. I remember Jake calling me out of the blue.

"Jake!" I said, pleasantly surprised to hear his voice when I answered the phone.

"Hey Ads," he said. "How're things out on the West Coast?"

"Good," I said. "It's great to hear from you. How're Amy and the kids?"

"Great, great," he answered. "Ben's shaping up to be quite the hockey player.

And Lindsay's like her ol' dad at hoops. Listen, Adam, Amy and I have an opportunity to go on this business thing to Hawaii – a kind of thank you trip for the company's top salesmen. With Dad being sick, and all, we felt bad asking Mom to watch the kids. We were thinking, maybe we could drop Ben and Lindsay with you for a few days – on our way – so they could spend some time with their Aunt and Uncle."

I said yes, of course, though Mara, my wife, wondered how we would entertain two pre-teens for what turned out to be almost a week. We needn't have worried. Lindsay spent the whole week sitting by our pool, tanning herself and texting her friends, while Ben spent most days with a friend from camp who lived in a nearby town. Jake and Amy breezed by for a few hours before hopping on the plane to Hawaii.

"You're the best," Jake told me as he scooped up his kids on his way back east, in between planes. "I owe you big time."

Before Dad got sick, he and Mom came out to see us a couple of times. They always asked about my job – I design video games for a small company in the Silicon Valley that makes music-related titles; I'm particularly proud of a game I developed that has allowed fans of games like Rock Band and Guitar Hero to play instruments other than the guitar and drums. I've written code for the sax and the trumpet, and am currently working on piano. I tried to explain what I do to my parents, but what did they know about video games?

Dad told me about how Jake had been named "Salesman of the Year" at his new company. I wasn't surprised that my brother, who had job-hopped a bit over the years, had finally found his calling as a salesman: He's a flashy talker, well-practiced in the art of persuasion. Dad told me how Jake had had some guys from his company install a 40-inch screen TV in their living room.

"That's great," I said.

“Wynton Marsalis has agreed to license his songs to Adam’s company for use in the game he designed,” Mara informed them. She cannot understand my parents’ fixation on Jake.

“That’s great,” my mother said. I doubted she even knew who Wynton Marsalis was.

My eyes make their way to the clock. It is only two thirty. They wander back to my father. His eyes are open, but he has that glazed look that people sometimes get when they have just woken up, like his eyes have not yet registered what is before them, like he is still seeing things in his own mind.

Jake told me about how when he visited a few weeks ago, Dad mistook him for his own brother. “Charlie – what are you doing?” he had asked my bewildered brother. He told me he kept saying “Dad, it’s me Jake,” but that it was like Dad was talking in his sleep and my brother couldn’t wake him. He hasn’t been back to see him since.

“Dad,” I say tentatively, leaning forward eagerly on my chair. He turns his head slightly, and looks over at me. And it’s as if his face comes alive.

“Jake?” he says, and his voice is so full of hope that it nearly breaks my heart.

“Yes, Dad,” I say. “I’m here.”