

He couldn't remember her. As he sat in the hard leather chair within the pristine, museum-like office the woman spoke to the man in the white coat.

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

Anna turned and looked at Ryan, who remained unmoving. She saw the vacant expression on his face as confirmation that he was unaware of his surroundings. He smiled shyly and nodded, as if acknowledging a stranger on the street. No, he didn't remember her, but she remembered all of him.

The ticking started slowly and on his left side. Anna remembered it was January, right after their anniversary. It began with an ongoing stroke between his left thumb and forefinger. They thought it was anxiety; stress from the job. Anna recalled Ryan fighting with his boss routinely about the continuous disintegration of his work, the illegible tax documents, and 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. She remembered him coming home late regularly, his eyes red and puffy from both fatigue and grief as they both watched his livelihood slowly slip away. At first the writhing was controllable through sheer will, but after only a few months Ryan lost his mind control and instead he was left with a game of chess between the center part of his brain and the movement of his arm and leg.

She remembered that his brain usually won.

Mentally he was unchanged, the same man that earned a Master's Degree in Business from Johns Hopkins University. He was the same man that fought for her, perseverating on their relationship in the beginning, insisting that she give him a chance even though she was technically already spoken for. He was the same man that talked her into sky-diving on a whim,

holding her small frame in strong embrace, creating a perfect sense of comfort and security against the pounds of pressured force on their bodies. Only a year and a half ago he was the man that mowed the lawn, took out the garbage, climbed ladders, and completely other required husbandly duties that Anna felt guilty for taking for granted.

He also was the man that held her when her mother died.

She remembered burying her face into his broad chest as he calmed her panic with the rhythm of his gentle breathing and his masculine left hand stroking her soft, black curls with perfect finesse and touch. She remembered him whispering prayers to her, and his strong form carrying her up the stairs of their home when she was too hysterical to walk. She thought about all the times she was too depressed to cook dinner, too helpless to continue her daily routines, and how ironic the situation seemed in hindsight as she remembered his perfection – the way he enjoyed life as an active, self-sufficient man, never complaining and never hopeless.

Before long his physical decline had become too much to hide. The endless pulsing of his hand kept him from keeping a hold of his coffee cup. Ryan 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 position. His writing became microscopic and more erratic in its alignment. His legs resorted to severely shortened steps, causing him to fall multiple times at work, relying on his petite secretary to aid in his rescue. Anna remembered that Ryan's boss 'was not in the position to make exceptions,' and that he had 'better get a handle on things.'

Then she remembered when Ryan brought home his office in a box.

"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."

Ryan remained stoic in his posture as the man in the white coat offered no comfort to Anna. His broad shoulders and wide chest cast a shadow over the oak desk, and he began to shift quietly to unwedge his hips and thighs from the tight compression of the chair. Anna watched as he twisted 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 over the normal expectation for a healthy, adult male. He could bench press an extreme weight, sprint faster than he ever could before, and he developed the stamina to complete a half marathon in virtually record time. He had become a superhero, released after months of confinement. Anna 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 woman and a man in a white coat.

Anna remembered how astonished the doctors were at the diagnosis. Ryan was too young, they said, and the disease too advanced. Normal progression took years, even in the worst cases. 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 twenty-five year old to a walker, his balance eliminated by the extraneous movements, with the future of a wheelchair not far behind. Anna remembered recently bathing him, attempting to hold one of his arms firmly in her grasp while sponging the other. Months ago, in the beginning, he was too strong for her and several times she ended the cleansing session with bruises on her

body that were met with languishing eyes by her friends and family. But as the disease consumed him and he transformed into a frail skeleton, Anna was able to complete her daily caregiver tasks without incident, though the expression of her loved ones remained unchanged.

She watched as Ryan's body atrophied and the disease confined him to bed. There, in the place they made love so many times before, in the place they fell asleep holding one another. She remembered that January when it had started, when they were trying for a baby, an option no longer plausible. There, in the spot that served most people as the foundation of marriage, where they awoke to each other's bad breath and disheveled appearance. There on the soft mattress with plush pillow-top bedspread, like regular people in a regular house. Unaffected, in a normal life. There, in that same space, Ryan was slowly perishing. The perpetual movement was just enough to be constantly fatiguing but not enough to prevent pressure sores. After five years of marriage, and more than one year of living in unyielding torment, Death was awaiting him on their bed. In the same place where they were completely devoted to one another as persistently loving and committed newlyweds even after all that time, Anna remembered turning him one evening to change the dressing of a deep, oozing wound on his right buttock. His thick, brown hair was damp and matted from sweating, and, despite her best efforts on daily cleansing, she noticed his odor. She remembered hearing him whimper, and felt the soft shudder of his bony shoulders. Then, when she turned him onto his back, she remembered the last words he ever said to her.

“Anna,” he whispered. “I love you.”

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

“Please kill me.”

Anna remembered how sick and tortured he was, how miserable his life had become. She wanted to do everything from that moment forward to stop the agony. She could not bear to watch him slowly waste away, his middle-brain starving his body into lifelessness. She couldn't watch the life of the man she loved being cruelly stripped into a hollow void by an unseen disease. She remembered telling him she wouldn't disappoint him. She remembered saying she would do anything to make him happy.

And then she remembered promising to Ryan that she 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.”

The man in the white coat 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.”

The man paused briefly but continued before Anna could sense too much optimism.

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

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.”

Anna lowered her head. The man sat waiting for a response, proud of the treatment that had occurred, proud that such a severe case of physical deformity had almost completely reversed. After a few minutes of Anna’s silence and lack of shared enthusiasm, he offered one other abrupt suggestion.

“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.”

Anna looked over to Ryan who offered again his blank, smiling gesture. She observed the confusion in his face: the purpose of the office, the conversation, the woman, and the man in the white coat. He looked perfect, almost angelic, like the year before treatment was a nightmarish fantasy. All the 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. In an instant Anna remembered his proposal at Central Park, the tourists gathering around as if the anonymous couple were familiar celebrities. She recalled their wedding day, a New Year’s Eve party where he emitted charming nervousness as they slow-danced in front of hundreds of guests. Then there was the move to the lake house, a place of perfection and encompassing serenity, a place where their family would

grow. Anna remembered all the happiness that came with five years of loving him, and then, in elongated moments, she remembered it wasn't just another day. He had fought a lengthy battle with his own body. She remembered the extensive deterioration of his sense of self – his loss of will, the weakening of his flesh, the emergence of a seemingly human carcass. She remembered his pain, his loss of hope, his desire to end life early. She wanted to be selfish, just this once – to have the man back that she married, the man who always stood by her. The man smiling in pictures of vacations at the beach and fishing on the lake, embracing the woman he knew and loved, the woman he fought for.

And then she remembered - his misery and her promise.

Anna smiled back at Ryan, tears falling down her face. She was thankful and relieved that he would remember none of this. Then, she turned to the man in the white coat.

“Dr. Benson,” she said. “What choice do I have?”