

He couldn't remember her. He sat in the hard, leather chair within the pristine, museum-like office and quietly observed as she spoke to the man in the white coat. He thought hard, focusing on her flawless features – the high-cut cheekbones, the long flow of her dark eyelashes overlaying the whites of her eyes. Her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail that, despite her lack of sleep and obvious fatigue, still made her look unspoiled. The exception was that he could see that she had been crying, but he couldn't determine if he should console her. Unsure of his options he sat complacent, shifting his attention to the anatomical models on the desk as the woman continued her bargaining with the man across from them.

“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 ticks started slowly, and on his non-dominant side. At first the writhing was controllable through sheer will, but after only a few months Ryan lost his mind control over the limbs and proceeded to engage in a chase after his own appendages. Every morning a day of chess ensued between his voluntary movement path and the extraneous muscle fasciculations decided by the deterioration of his Substantia Nigra. She remembered it began with the pill-rolling – an ongoing stroke between his left thumb and forefinger. They thought it was anxiety; stress from the job. Anna remembered 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 from watching his livelihood slowly slip away. Mentally he was unchanged, the same man that earned a Master's Degree from Johns Hopkins University, but his physical decline had become too much to hide. Before long the endless pulsing of his hand kept him from keeping a grasp on his coffee cup. His writing became microscopic and more erratic in its alignment. He had fallen multiple times in the hallway, relying on his small-framed secretary to aid in his rescue. Anna remembered that his boss 'was not in the position to make exceptions,' and that Ryan 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 the woman sitting beside him. 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. Ryan grieved for the loss of time from his daily gym visit. 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 Dopamine medication, the doctors prescribed protein powder and iron pills, which gave him the energy and endurance to build his back his muscle girth and bone structure, now well over a normal range for a healthy, adult male. He could bench press an extreme weight, more than most athletes, and he was working with his trainer in preparation for the upcoming the half marathon. He was, now, a superhero, released after months of confinement. Ryan sighed heavily, annoyed that his day was being interrupted without his

permission, and that his gym routine was being delayed because of the seemingly endless conversation between the woman and the man in the white coat.

Anna remembered how astonished the doctors were at the diagnosis. Ryan was too young, they said, and the disease too advanced. The MRI didn't lie, however, and the persistent twisting and unyielding distortion of his limbs that they 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. She remembered bathing him, attempting to hold one of his arms firmly in her grasp while sponging the other. In the beginning he was too strong for her, and several times she ended the cleansing session with bruises that were met with languishing eyes by her friends and family. But as the disease consumed him, and he transformed into a frail, almost elderly body, Anna was able to complete her daily tasks without incident. She watched as Ryan's body atrophied and the disease confined him to bed. There, in the place they made love, in the place they fell asleep holding one another, 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 one year of living in unyielding torment, Death was awaiting him here in their bed. In the same place where they consummated their marriage, tried for children, and were completely devoted to one another, Anna remembered turning him one evening to change the dressing of a deep, oozing wound on his right buttock. His hair was damp 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 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 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 remembered the vows she took, and she remembered making a promise 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 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. His memory may come back with time Mrs. McCullough.

“But, then again, it may not.”

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. I am sorry for the unfortunate and unexpected side effect. But you made the right decision.”

Anna lowered her head. The man waited for a response, and, after a few minutes when there was none, he offered one other 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 at Ryan who offered again his blank, smiling gesture. He was still unsure of the purpose of the office, the conversation, the woman, and the man in the white coat. He looked perfect, almost angelic, like the last year was a nightmarish fantasy. In an instant she remembered his proposal, their wedding day, the move to the lake house, and all the happiness that came with five years of loving him. Then, in elongated moments, she remembered the fighting within his own body. She remembered the lengthy deterioration of his sense of self – his loss of will, the weakening of his flesh, the emergence of a frail skeleton. She remembered his pain, his loss of hope, his desire to end life early.

And then she remembered her oath.

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?”