

“I just feel lost right now” I squeaked out, “I know I’m overthinking it but I can’t stop”

I was trying to hold it together, staring intently at the trim of my dorm room wall, awaiting a response from the other end of the line. I felt bad bugging him, mostly because I knew he would drop everything to make sure I was okay, but I didn’t know what else to do. He gave me the usual answer of ‘take some deep breaths’ ‘take it one step at a time’ ‘just do your best’. From anyone else I’d roll my eyes at the generic advice.

“Unfortunately you seem to have inherited a replica of my brain, so I know how you feel. Sorry about that.” He said.

I mustered a small chuckle through the tears. He always says that like it’s a bad thing. I enjoy the way my brain works and I enjoy the understanding we share because of our similarities. I wish he could understand that.

“You’ll get through it, you always do” He went on, “Make sure you’re eating, and sleeping, and drinking water. I worry about you, you know”

“I know. I will. I’m just overwhelmed right now, I guess” I got up from the floor and stretched a little, my meltdown seeming to be over. Funnily enough I worry about him just as much as he worries about me, if not more. We’re both worriers.

“Understandable. One bad test score doesn’t define anything, it’s not gonna derail your life”

I knew he was right, but I’m stubborn. “I just prefer no bad test scores”

The carpet of the entire building was a god awful green. I pressed the buzzer and the heavy metal double doors swung wide open. The nurses station was right next to the entrance. It

was one long desk that connected to the wall at one end, and it was lined with computers. A nurse was sitting there, wearing a dark purple scrub top with too many pens sticking out of the pocket. I liked that nurse. She never ran out of patience with my dad. After chatting with her for a bit, I made my way down the hallway to the third door on the right. I stared down at my shoes and took a deep breath, hoping for a good day. I gently knocked and slowly opened the door, hesitantly stepping inside.

“Who the hell are you?”

I hadn't even gotten any words out yet. He was sitting in a brown leather recliner, pushed as far back as it could go, his feet still managing to hang off the edge. The slippers mom got him for Christmas a couple years ago on his feet as he bounced them around, restless. A *Wheel of Fortune* rerun was on TV. I don't think I've seen him watch anything else since he got here. The room was tiny; a full sized bed in one corner, a dresser across from it, a bathroom next to the door, the recliner and the TV.

“It's Mackenzie, your daughter” I replied evenly.

“No you're not” He looked disgusted I would even propose the idea I was related to him.

“Just a visitor then” I said.

“Hmm, okay” he replied gruffly, turning his attention back towards the TV.

It couldn't make sense of his logic, but at least he wasn't arguing with me this time. I sat down on the edge of the bed. A lot of my visits went like this, him not knowing who I was and me sitting on his bed not knowing what to say. I used to try harder to make him remember, but he got angry if you pushed too much.

“I had some weird patients at the hospital today” I told him, attempting to make conversation.

He didn't reply for a few seconds. “Antique bathtub”

“What?” My eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

He nodded towards the TV, “Antique bathtub”

It was the answer to the half-finished Wheel of Fortune puzzle. The category was ‘Things Around the House’. He usually liked my crazy patient stories, apparently not today.

“Your nurse said you wanted to go for a walk this morning but hadn't been able to get one in, you still up for it?” I tried again.

He grumbled a little bit, fidgeting in his chair, “I *suppose* so”

I helped him sit upright, then grabbed his walker from behind the door and placed it in front of him. His eye-roll was so strong I could feel it. I knew he didn't like the walker, but older patients don't last long after a fall. He situated himself at the edge of his seat and started struggling a bit to get up, but I knew he wasn't going to ask for help. I faced him and hooked my right arm underneath his left arm, and on the count of three helped lift him to a standing position. I let him breathe for a minute. He started to move slowly towards the door, me following behind him. It was *deja vu* from my time as a nursing assistant. We made it to the door and I held it open for him to move through. He paused, staring down the ground just outside the doorway.

“Who the hell thought green would be a good color for a carpet?” He asked.

I shook my head, “Tell me about it”

She hadn't come to see him before and insisted I was there for her first time. I went through the motions of buzzing in, waiting for the doors to swing open. Third room on the right. I had already given my sister the rundown about how he might act. He probably won't remember you, he gets angry easily, mostly we just watch *Wheel of Fortune*. She seemed nervous.

I lightly knocked on the door and gingerly opened it. I walked a few steps in, my sister a half step behind me. As per usual he was in his recliner, feet bouncing off the edge.

"Hey dad" I said.

He looked confused. "Who are you?"

I looked at my sister and shrugged. This is just how it went. She stepped in front of me and bent down next to him. All of a sudden, a light switch in his brain went off. He recognized her, calling her by name. They hugged as I awkwardly sat down on the bed.

"How are you? How was practice today?" He asked.

My sister looked at me. There was no practice today. She hadn't had a practice to go to since she graduated high school years ago. I didn't say anything, I didn't feel like helping her right now.

"Did mom pick you up? I haven't seen her in a while, she's been working a lot lately" He looked sad. This wasn't the first time he'd asked about my mom. Whether he actually knew what was going on or not, he definitely wanted to see her.

"Has mom not visited yet?" My sister asked me.

"I'm the only one that's visited"

My dad was the biggest Cub's fan I knew. He grew up in Chicago going to Cub's games, worked for the organization in college, we even had cereal boxes with David Ross's and Anthony Rizzo's faces on them as decor in my childhood home. One July we took a family trip to Chicago and decided to catch a Cub's game. I liked baseball, but I liked it significantly more when I could watch from the comfort of my couch. I was 16 and in a phase where I didn't particularly like my parents. Our seats were high up, but right behind home plate. We trudged upwards in a line, my dad leading the way with my younger sister right behind him, me behind her, and my mom coming up last. I could hear my dad and sister messing around, laughing. Admittedly, I was grouchy and not having a good time.

"Would you quit being so pissy all the time?" My mother whisper yelled at me from behind.

I turned and looked at her with a blank stare. We found our seats and I made sure to sit as far away from her as possible. My dad was on one side of me and the aisle was on the other. I'd brought a book to read for when I got bored. The book was open as soon as the game started and I had read a few pages when I felt a nudge.

"You're missing all the best parts you know?" My dad said.

That was his way of asking if I was okay.

"I'm just tired." My excuse for everything those days.

He was sympathetic, "I know, it's hot and crowded, but c'mon, it's the Cubs. Have you even tried to enjoy it?"

"According to mom I'm too pissed to enjoy anything so" I trailed off.

“She just wants the family to have a good time, she put a lot of work into this vacation. Don’t be too tough on her”

I begrudgingly nodded my head, acknowledging he might have had a point.

“Plus it's the Cubs” He fake pouted. To disrespect the Cubs was to disrespect his honor.

“Fine. But I need a hot dog for compensation” I complied, my tone lighter than before.

“Deal, but you’ve gotta tell me more about this AP bio class you’re in” He knew this was an opportunity I wouldn’t pass up.

He flagged down the man selling hot dogs as I started rambling off random biology facts. He didn’t understand a word I was saying but continued to nod and ask questions, encouraging me to go on. Eventually, I’d completely forgotten the bad mood my day started with. My sister caught a t-shirt between innings and the whole family cheered. We were all actually having a good time. The Cubs lost, but the coach did get thrown out of the game, which we all thought was just as exciting.

Around midday, I got a call. My secretary poked her head into my office

“Line 4” She said.

I was already annoyed, I knew who it was. I paused, looking out my window. It was bright out and I could feel the warmth coming through the glass panes. A smidge of hope that the cold might finally be coming to an end. I picked up the phone.

“Are you busy? It’s your dad.”

I wished they wouldn't contact me. I wished they could handle things themselves. I was frustrated with the nurses, even though I know they're doing their job and were probably exhausted. I was exhausted too.

"I'll be there in a half hour" I responded.

My mom was old and in denial. My sister lived out of town and couldn't swing by at a moment's notice. Plus, I was the doctor of the family, obviously I should know what to do.

When I arrived, he was in the dining area. Standing there, cursing out the nurses for poisoning his pudding cup, and banging his hands on the table. The nurses had already taken away everything he could throw. I felt like a teacher breaking up a fight on the playground.

"We haven't been able to get him to calm down" A nurse said to me.

I don't know what makes them think I'd be any help, he seemed to hate me lately. There was pudding all over the table and floor. It looked like he had thrown it at a nurse. If I were in a better mood I'd have laughed.

"Hey" I said loudly, bracing myself.

He paused momentarily and looked at me, shocked into silence. "She put something in my pudding cup" he said quietly.

"I know, dad. I'll take care of it. Can you sit down for me?"

"Like hell I can. You won't take care of it, you never do!" He was back to yelling. It was all nonsense. 'F this and F that', 'F all of you', etc.

I was running out of patience.

“You’re being disruptive!” I matched his volume. I stepped closer, trying to get him to see me. I wanted to grab him and shake him back to normal. Shake him back into the person I used to know.

He kept yelling. He looked right at me. “Get out of my face” He spat at me.

“Stop screaming then!” I yelled right back, getting closer.

Before I knew it his hand flew across my face. For an old guy he could really swing. My cheek stung, but only for a second. We were both silent. When I looked back at him he didn’t seem sorry, just pissed. I wanted to hit him back. I wanted to scream in his face even more. I wanted to ask him how? How could he forget me? How, if I was as important to him as he always said, could he resent me so much? I wanted to scream and cry, curled up in a ball on the floor like I used to do in college. I wanted to flip the table, throw the chair through the window. I wanted to tell off the nurses, asking where the hell they got their degrees from if they can't handle just one rowdy patient by themselves, tell them that I should be getting a cut of their paycheck. I wanted to make my father understand how much he’d hurt me. But I kept silent. I turned my eyes down to the disgusting green carpet, now covered in an off-white vanilla pudding. After regaining my composure, I politely asked him to sit again. He did. Whether because he was sorry or because he finally got his point across I didn’t know.

“At least he’s quiet now” One of the nurses found their voice.

“I would appreciate you handling this yourself next time” I said to her.

Bonfires were a staple for our family during the summer. I was home from college and we were all sitting outside. We were decked out in sweatshirts and blankets, the fire not

providing enough heat. My dad had his astronomy app out on his phone, trying to show us where all the constellations were in the clear sky, the sound of the cubs game on the radio in the background. It was a good night, all of us laughing and reminiscing about when we were younger. Somehow we got on the topic of my parent's dog they had before they were married.

“Mom let you get a dog?” My sister asked, my mom rolling her eyes in response.

My dad responded, “Oh yeah, she’s the one that wanted it, it was the kids she didn’t want”

I gasped in fake hurt, my sister following my lead.

“I always knew I wanted kids, I knew I wanted a family. The days you guys were born were the best days of my life. Your mom though” He went on, his eyebrows raised in a joking manner.

“Peter,” My mom lightly hit his shoulder. “Making me look like I didn’t want them. I didn’t want kids *until* I met your dad. That’s when I knew we needed you guys” she gestured to my sister and me, “to complete our family. I wouldn’t want it any other way.” She clarified, my dad laughing.

For as much as they joked, I knew they loved each other. And loved us. They often referred to each other as soulmates, and it was evident just being around them. We were out for a long time that night, watching the stars, laughing at random stuff. I was lucky to have all of them.

Another day, another call from the nursing home. They always seemed to be on line 4. I mentally practiced telling them I’m too busy to stop by today.

“Are you busy? It’s your dad.” The nurse said, “He’s lucid”

That’s not what I was expecting. Alert and oriented are not words normally used to describe my dad, but that day it fit. I rearranged my meetings and made my way over. I rang the doorbell and waited to be let in. Down the hallway, third room on the right, his door was already open. I wrung my hands nervously before knocking and stepping into the room.

He broke out into a smile, immediately filling the room with warmth “Hey Kenz”

He used my childhood nickname.

I couldn’t help but laugh softly as I choked back tears, “Hey dad, how are you?”

I immediately knew it was him. The real him. He was sitting in his recliner and I leaned over to give him a hug before sitting on the edge of his bed.

“Well I don’t like this carpet, and the food could be better, but otherwise not too bad” he replied. “How are you? How are you handling everything?”

Typical of him to dive right in and ask how I’m doing when he’s the one with this diagnosis. Part of me wanted to tell him the truth, that he was tearing me apart.

“I’m just fine, don’t you worry about me” I said, “What are your thoughts about all of it?”

Before I even asked the question, I knew he wasn’t going to answer. His eyes were sad, he looked defeated.

This wasn’t how he wanted life to go. I silently wondered how long this would last, how long until he goes crazy again.

“Do you remember when grandpa died? How he kept trying to get out of bed?” He asked.

I did remember. When my grandpa was dying, all he wanted to do was get up and move. It was almost as if his body could tell it was shutting down, and he was trying to stave it off. Like fighting sleep.

“Do you think that’ll be me?” He couldn’t seem to meet my eyes.

In medical school we learned about the signs of active death. Gurgling breaths followed by periods of no breaths at all, restlessness and agitation, drop in temperature. I’d seen it many times at the hospital, so much so that watching someone struggle through the symptoms rarely bothered me anymore. It happens to everyone, but I didn’t mention that.

“I don’t think we’re anywhere near there right now” I replied.

“I just want to be prepared. We have the same brain, you should know what I’m thinking” He joked.

I smiled softly and rolled my eyes, “How many times have I told you that’s not really how that works?”

“You’re just too smart for me”

We both turned back to the TV, *Wheel of Fortune* was on.

“Four word phrase” I said, “Two L’s, one C, and three E’s”

He thought for a second, “All in one piece”.