

the talk

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It is so quiet in the parking garage the night my husband passed out. The overhead fluorescent lights paint pale yellow shadows over the rows of cars waiting, like sleeping dogs, for the jingle of keys announcing a driver's return. We walk up the incline of the ramp towards our car—there is a warning, yet we fail to interpret it as a warning. It is the moment before the moment.

"My legs have that heavy feeling. I need to rest a minute," my husband says.

It has happened before. Many times. The doctor ordered tests that revealed nothing. More tests are scheduled for a month later. "Rest and it will pass," was the standing medical advice. We step to the side

of the ramp and rest a minute as incoming cars inch past us in search of a parking space.

Our car is parked facing the Eastern wall of the garage, adjacent to the ticket machine. There is a two-foot space between the row of stanchions, which indicate where the wheels of the car rest, and the wall.

Minutes later he stands in front of the blinking and grinding automated ticket machine while it takes its time to spit out the paid parking ticket. Perhaps it's a certain hesitancy as he puts the ticket in his pocket, an awkward step, or simply some intuition that prompts me to say, "Let me drive home."

'OK.' He agrees and hands me the parking ticket without the requisite

argument. That should have been my second warning. I place my purse in the back seat and open the drivers' door. The windshield frames his first few steps in front of the hood of the car on his journey to the passenger seat. I see him turn—toward the car—toward me—as though reaching for the chrome hood ornament—as though reaching for me—as though about to speak. No words come, only a massive bewilderment contorting his face, as arms flail forward towards the front of the car, while his body begins its long tipping backwards.

"Are you having a heart attack?" I scream. *Do I expect an answer? I want him to tell me I'm overreacting. Who else had I asked all the years of marriage to soft peddle a problem, tell me not to worry, tell me everything was ok, tell me this too will pass? You with your corny jokes. Why had I refused to laugh at them? And talk of sports that cluttered the air with diversions I didn't care about, are already gone.*

I wordlessly plead with him, with God, to alter this aberration of reality, like the time he willed his knees to bend and bend again, denying the pain in order to traipse with me through the ruins in Greece and all the times his positivity punched holes in a worry that threatened to overwhelm me.

I reach him while he is still falling but I can't stop gravity even as I try to grab his arm. His legs are skewing like a rag doll, his shoulders are

propping themselves alongside the concrete wall of the parking garage. For one wild moment I believe he is sitting, that he has broken the fall. Oh joy! Then I hear it, the resounding sound of his skull smashing full force against the brick wall pitching him forward as gravity sends his face onto the concrete floor. I am on the floor with him, my face next to his ear, my hands caressing his shoulders and I am shouting, "I love you, I love you, I love you." *I want him to hear me. I want "I love you," to be the last words he hears on this earth. I know they will make him happy. When did I say them last? It is all I can do for him. "I love you, I love you" I can think of nothing more important than knowing one is loved. God knows they are not words I have uttered in recent years with the same intensity as "You forgot to get gas in the car, again."*

His eyes are open, a glazed stare. "Can you hear me?"

A guttural noise emerges from his mouth, a noise I associate with a stroke. He is trying to reach me. He heard me. At least he heard me. I say it again, "I love you. I'm going to get help. You will be ok."

I don't want to take my hands off his shoulders, his back. *We have never had "the talk." As though we are going to live forever. Do other have the talk? Why haven't we talked about death? An afterlife?* I want to keep him alive by touching him, but I stand up. The garage is empty. We are alone. *Where are the people who gather around an*

accident, where are the people with cell phones? I run to retrieve my purse and my phone from the back seat of the car. I push the home button. Circles of numbers appear. I punch in 911. Again and again, I can't connect to an operator. 911 is the only number that exists and it is failing me. I push the home button again. Numbers flashes in front of me. I don't remember the code to unlock my phone; I don't remember if there is an emergency access button. I keep trying to punch in 911 and the numbers keep flashing, a lottery of numbers and I am caught in the loop going nowhere.

Later I will remember those precious seconds when I ran to retrieve my phone. The warm stream of pee trickling down the inside of my thighs, squeezing my legs together with the realization that I was wetting myself.

I scream, "Help me, help me, somebody help me, please somebody help me." I stand up. Somehow I know I must stand to be seen even though I belong on the floor with him.

Someone is running down the stairs from the second floor of the parking deck. Later he will tell me his name is Adam. We both bend down over my husband. His eyes are closed now. I start all over, "I love you, I love you." I cradle my husbands' head, placing my hand between his skull and the wall. There is blood. There is so much blood. Adam calls 911. He

follows the operator's instructions. Adam asks my husband's name. "Bob, it's Bob," I answer. And Adam is shouting "Bob, Bob, come on, talk to us." and I am screaming "Bob, Bob, open your eyes," then I watch as Adam places his hand in front of my husbands mouth and I hear him tell the operator, "Yes, I can feel breath," and for that moment I know my husband is still alive.

In some alchemy of wonder, you open your eyes—gurr— gurr—an awful pitiful sound flooding me with gratitude. *Oh, you are a bull*, I think as I embrace his still wide shoulders. *A stubborn bull who always believed in a good ending, whether it was coasting into a gas station just in time to avoid sputtering to a dead halt on the road or talking me through a night of high fevers when one of the children was sick. Now after all these years I am reveling in his stubbornness, his bull nature.* He is not giving up. He is willing himself back. *I've got to remember to tell you this.*

I hear sirens approaching. Police, ambulance, medical people are permeating the air with a false calm. Someone says, "You have to leave him so we can work." Then "Get the stretcher. Don't move his neck." *But I have already moved his neck when I picked up his head. Did I break his neck?* Four or five policemen and women surround me with their bodies. There are questions. I try to break away and return to him but they are herding me. I stand on my

toes; shout over the shoulders of my shepherds, "I'm right here. Can you hear me? There is no response. I give someone a list of his medication and then someone says, "He could bleed out. We need to get him to a trauma center."

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I can hear someone asking questions. "What's your name?" *Did I hear you answer, or did I imagine it?* "Where do you live? When is your birthday? What's today's date?" *Are you kidding me, I have not passed out or smashed my head on a brick wall and I couldn't tell you today's date if I had a calendar in front of me.* Amazed, I hear the medic say, "Good Bob, you're right. It's Wednesday September 28th. Let's get him in the ambulance."

Adam comes to me. His clear scrubbed face earnest. A soft brown leather bag is slung over his shoulder.

"Do you want me to come to the hospital with you?" he asks. I hesitate.

"I can come if you need someone with you."

"No," I blurt out. "You have done so much. Thank you, thank you. I

can't thank you enough. I will get in touch with you. What's your phone number? I need a pen, a pencil. Where's my purse? Adam reaches into his shirt pocket. He finds his pen but we have no paper. He assesses me, the situation. "Give me your phone number," he says. "I will text you my information." And so I dictate my number and he punches it into his phone. I want to hug him. Perhaps I did hug him. We say good-bye.

Someone tells me to lock the car. They will take me in the ambulance; but only in the front seat, next to the driver. "You can't go in the back with him. The medics have to do their work."

The motor is purring as I climb in and buckle the seat belt. Within two minutes the driver gets a signal from the trauma center. They are ready for us. He turns on the siren and we are speeding in and out of traffic on our way to the hospital.

The back of the ambulance is bright, lit up like daylight. I can't see my husband, only hear the EMT workers asking the same questions again and again. *They are trying to keep him conscious while they address his condition.* "What's your name? Your address? Your date of birth?" I can hear muffled responses. But then an odd response. It doesn't seem to connect to the question. "Are you going to send me a card?" It doesn't make sense. My heart drops. The

medic's voice shows alarm.

"What? What was that Bob? What did you say?" I hear my husband repeat his offbeat answer. Suddenly, I get it. I know what's going on. You can't be married all these years and not know, "He's making a joke," I shout into the back of the ambulance, "He thinks he's funny, he's referring to the question about his date of birth. He wants to know if you are going to send him a card."

"Wha? Oh, now I get it" one of the medics says, obviously relieved. We all chuckle in unison, even the driver. He's trying to entertain them with a corny joke. That's what he does, and it aggravates me no end, but not tonight. *Keep it up. Tell all the jokes you want. I'm even laughing. Just stay alive, you bull, and I promise I will always laugh at your corny, ridiculous jokes.*

Later that week, as I sit alongside him in the hospital room, he tells me he has one memory of the whole incident. He doesn't remember passing out, or hitting his head, or trying to speak, or my screams for help, or Adam, or the police, or the bandage on his head, the IV line, the stretcher, the ambulance. The only thing he remembers is hearing me say, "I love you."

