

Runner

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Back before the stroke, when my grandmother's Alzheimer's was still worsening dementia, when the moments of clarity weren't rare enough to applaud, I asked her how it feels, if losing your memories feels like anything at all.

We were sitting in her backyard, on those old plastic beach chairs we only ever brought to the beach that one time, until the storm forced us home. Still, we braved the rain long enough to devour so much frozen custard that

my stomach ached for hours, her treat.

My duty that day was to help her pretend that, just inside, my mother wasn't sorting the last forty years of her life into boxes marked TRASH, DONATE, and SELL. There was no room to KEEP in the nursing home.

No, not nursing home: *memory care facility*. That was the technical term. When we first drove to visit the facility, I asked my mother if the nurses cared for the memories or just the shell. She didn't answer.

"Does it hurt?" I asked my grandmother,

brushing an ant from her soft, sunburned knee.

Time slowed for her that summer. Maybe it stopped all together. She spent her days burning in the sun, sitting and crying and watching the sky, wondering if she left the stove on, but not wondering hard enough to check. The new sunspots on her knuckles were the only proof she existed at all.

It took a minute or two before my grandmother spoke, and even now I can't remember the exact words she used. It's possible they weren't words at all. No amount of crossword puzzles could protect my grandmother's brain from a disease that dwindled her vocabulary to a stringy knot of phrases that no longer meant anything to her.

I can still hear the quiet reverence in her voice. I can still see the slow realization weighing in her limbs that this was her inescapable future. But it's the words that trouble me most. I deciphered her answer in such a way that I now have to accept it as real.

It feels like I'm searching for something solid in a mist of particles.

I wanted to tell her that I'd always try to stay solid for her, but her eyes had already clouded again before I had the chance.

When my grandmother speaks now, it is all but impossible to decode her words. Letters jumble together, but never quite connect in a way that makes sense. I imagine the words knocking around her brain and bouncing back with an electric charge, like the atoms in the sun.

The summer before last, when the heat wave hit Rochester with unbreathable heaviness, I managed to secure a job as an aide in a special education classroom for the second year in a row. But I was only ever hired because of my mother's connections. She was a speech pathologist in the same program for more than thirty years.

I've had her describe the science behind

it, how the phonetics and genetics and language combine to form communication, but I've never struggled with speech. It is beyond my comprehension how, even in the wordless, my mother never doubted that the words were there.

I may have inherited my crooked fingers and dark curls from her, but I know for certain that the compassion gene skipped a generation.

It's only thirty days.

That's what my mother said every time I complained, which was often. I counted down to my first day of work with a type of dread reserved for dental surgery.

I'm not qualified, I told her. *I don't even like kids.*

But my mother saw through my excuses. Ever since my classroom assignment arrived in the mail, a tangle knotted in my gut, pulling tighter and tighter and tighter until I was certain I could no longer breathe.

Kindergarten. Nonverbal.

Almost a quarter of children on the autism spectrum are considered nonverbal. There are devices to aid communication, like the DynaVox. A student can press a word or phrase, and the box will speak it in a robotic voice. *I have to use the bathroom. Today is Tuesday. I love you.*

Most families cannot afford this technology.

Communication morphs into an endless struggle between the verbal and the nonverbal, each fluent in a language the other cannot comprehend.

There's a whole set of slang terms in special education, classifying students, their services, their prognoses. On that first day of summer school, when I reached the classroom, eight minutes late, I did not know this.

Really, I didn't know anything.

Once all of the aides had shown up, I counted six of us total, plus the teacher, Patti. I was the only aide who didn't work in the program full time, and the only aide who had never

worked with these students before.

They gave me a brief rundown: Timmy was severely epileptic, sometimes having more than a dozen seizures in a single day. Becca was a sweetheart, but needed constant supervision because of her pica—the uncontrollable urge to eat, regardless of edibility. Isaac, at some point throughout the summer, was probably going to punch me. (He did. Three times.)

They assumed I was in college for special education, but never asked if this was true. The entire time they spoke, I felt the tangle in my gut tighten. On the blackboard was my misspelled name with a dotted line connecting it to another: *Tony*. My assignment for the summer.

The other aides left the classroom for the bus loop without a word as I debated correcting my name. They had the bus numbers memorized already. I wrote Tony's on my hand, just in case.

As I stepped into the hallway, Patti jogged after me, calling out my name. "Before you go, I thought I should warn you: Tony's a runner."

"A runner?"

Instead of elaborating, she waved me off, like my mother used to on the first day of school, shoving me into the hot morning light before I was ready.

I knew enough to infer what a runner was. In some children with autism, the urge to bolt surges through their bodies, out of nowhere. The urge is far too strong to squelch.

And so they run.

Victims with Alzheimer's don't run; they wander. It's a compulsion. My grandmother's wandering is so severe that she has to wear a watch with a microchip in it. If she's ever missing from her bedroom, the nurses bring up a

map on the computer and track the chip.

"Where are you going?" I asked her once. We were staring out the window at the lilacs across the street, when she shuffled away and into the hallways, hands on her hips.

She may have shrugged in response, though I can't remember exactly.

I pulled her back into her bedroom, hoping the window might draw her once more. Even with the watch and the chip, the constant blip on the computer screen tracking her movements, I couldn't let her go.

On that first day, Tony's bus was the last in the loop. The bus monitor was an older man with a thick Spanish accent and strong arms, and he wore a baseball cap with the team in-

signia ripped off. I told him I was there for Tony. He kind of laughed to himself, stepping back, sizing me up.

"Let me unhook him for you," he said.

I wanted to ask what that meant, but he was gone.

When the bus monitor reemerged, there was a boy in his shadow. Chubby, but not cute enough to look cherubic. His polo was green, and so were his rubber clogs. He was wearing Scooby Doo swim trunks. Around his torso was a faded blue harness, looping between his legs and fastening one, two, three times behind his back.

In my head I said, "Oh, God."

Out loud: "Hi, Tony!" My voice pitched up an octave. Tony ignored me.

His steps off the bus were slow and unsteady. Wobbly. (Another common symptom of kids with autism.) I reached out my hand, and he took my wrist.

"Are you excited for your first day of school? We're going to have so much fun!"

Victims with Alzheimer's don't run; they wander.

While we walked, Tony looked everywhere but in my eyes. The flagpole struck him more than anything else, and he stopped, right where he was, to stare for a moment. Then he carried on, shuffling in those ugly clogs, leading the way without a clue of where we were going.

All the while, I felt his presence beside me with heightened urgency. I needed to. I needed to know he was there, with a light grasp on my wrist, so that I would be able to sense if he ran.

But he didn't run.

We spent the long walk from the end of the bus loop to the classroom connected by a breakable grip, me pretending some sort of understanding might exist between us, both of us squinting back the blazing summer sun.

I can't grasp the concept of the sun. I know I learned about it in earth science, but I also failed almost every test and ended up with a C in the class. I'm still not convinced that the C was earned.

This is what I know: I know that the sun is one of the biggest stars in the solar system. It is the reason there is life on Earth, thanks to its energy, heat, and light. The day will come when the sun slowly burns out for good.

But I don't know what to do with this information.

Words, I understand. I can pick apart a sentence for metaphors and similes, plucking out the phrases that have the most meaning, pushing aside those that don't mean anything. I will break down a word to its Latin root. I don't have to think about it anymore. Language, communication, the way my words react to yours—I am verbal.

I can't grasp the concept of the sun, but I'm still going to try.

Tony, it turns out, wasn't entirely nonverbal. He knew a few words, like milk and playground and chips—his three favorite things—but whenever I pushed him to say more, like

the speech pathologist urged me to, he'd stare back at me with one eyebrow arched.

When I think about it, I realize that I let him get away with too much that summer. We abandoned his schedule by week two, and no matter how many times I'd say that he couldn't go outside if he didn't finish morning meeting, he'd find his way out there.

But no one in the classroom cared about either of us. We were both the new kids, both temporary nuisances in this cluttered space. Tony's desk was in the corner. The only chair left for me was child-sized, and so I crouched, knees to my chest, while the other aides towered over their students. They had workbooks to complete and tasks to test.

I had nothing.

Most days, I did little more than watch Tony form words he couldn't speak with a magnetic alphabet, rearranging the letters just to hear the plastic scrape against his desk.

Once, later in the summer, when my count-down to the end had reached single digits, I gave Tony a piece of paper and a green crayon. He started writing immediately.

I think I turned to say something to another aide, or maybe Becca clamped onto my shoulder, breathless from her painful journey across the room. I heard Tony's shaky voice say, "Beeee.... Youuuuu...."

Then Tony nudged me and handed me his paper, a wordless gift. On it was written a single word: *Buick*.

"Tony, you wrote this?" I asked, laughing.

He didn't answer. I didn't expect him to.

I showed everyone I could, saying, "Look what Tony wrote, can you believe this? It's Buick. He wrote the word Buick."

I even told his mother the next morning when she dropped him at school almost two hours late because she had overslept. She was young and tattooed, with paw prints tracking her chest. Tony clung to her belt loops. She

pushed him back by his forehead.

“Yeah, he does that,” she said, like it was nothing. “But it’s not like he knows what it is. It means nothing to him.”

I remember my mother telling me about a conference she had for one of her students years ago. The child’s impairments were a direct result of his mother’s drug usage while pregnant. Now clean and trying her best, the mother cried throughout the entire meeting and said again and again, “This is my punishment.”

The idea that certain disorders are deserved will never make sense to me. I often think of my grandmother, knowing for years that genetics were not in her favor, and I wonder if she thought that she had done something to deserve it.

But I also wonder if that might’ve made it easier to bear.

If she could ground her illness in a reason, or fault herself in some way, maybe that made it less scary. At least then she could trick herself into understanding.

Something solid in her impending uncertainty.

In solar eclipses, the moon passes the sun and blocks out its light, creating a glowing ring in the blackened sky. I’ve never seen one for myself, but my textbooks were filled with photographs, captioned with the dangers and consequences of looking directly into the sun.

I remind my grandmother of her past whenever we’re together. I tell her about my life, and how she’d be so proud of me if she knew. My mother is the best at it, though. She drops in buzzwords that she thinks might trigger my grandmother to remember with enough prodding.

But no matter how many times I tell my

grandmother who I am or why I’m pushing her wheelchair out to the courtyard for frozen custard—my treat—she doesn’t respond beyond a shrug, a laugh if I’m lucky.

I’m happy that she’s happy. Even if she doesn’t know why. Even if I will never stop praying that I can manage to bring forth a memory, no matter how fleeting.

The last week of summer school was hell for Tony. He had a sinus infection and he wasn’t sleeping well, and that past weekend he’d taken a nasty fall from his bike. A Band-Aid with almost no adhesive flapped on his chin.

It was Wednesday, which meant roller-skating. He hated roller-skating. So did I, ever since he tripped a few weeks before and brought me down with him.

I spent that hour in the humid gymnasium yanking Tony around a circle of mats. Most times, he’d flop down and just lay there, arms spread out, but the gym instructor was determined to make Tony move.

“Three more laps, and that’s it. You’re done.”

After lap one, Tony started to flop again, turning to deadweight in my arms, but I pulled him up, saying, “Two more, Tony, just two more.”

He began to cry.

“What is wrong?” I asked, and it was mean. My voice was harsh.

Tony spun around so he was facing me, wrapping his arms around my waist, throwing his head back as he wailed. His tears drenched my shirt. I swear I saw Tony go through the thoughts in his head, each knocking into the next, hurting harder with every collision.

“What is it, Tony? What is it?”

I would never get an answer.

There he stood, unsteady on his skates, sobbing into my stomach. His grip weighed

me down, and I had to hold him up beneath his arms, my feet planted on the sticky floor to keep my balance.

It was only then that I realized with heart-breaking clarity that I was responsible for holding both of us up.

And that I couldn't.

The sun is what anchors our solar system. But the sun is just a mix of plasma and gases, some faraway thing gliding across the sky. It will exist for as long as I live. Whether or not I figure out the way it works will not stop it from shining.

All I need to know is that it's there, and that as long as it is, I'll be here, too.

But a person cannot anchor the world. I wanted to believe that, and I did for too long. If I could say anything to Tony or to my grandmother and hope that they'd understand, I'd tell them how sorry I am for ever trying to be their sun.

Tony will never remember the summer he was six, or if he does, he won't remember me. I am a blot on his timeline, a smudge. A tally mark of the strangers he has met and forgotten. I wasn't something he could memorize and recite, like the ABCs. (His favorite letter was—is?—B. Line, loop, loop. He drew the best Bs of anyone I know.)

He'll never remember how he held my wrist as we walked through the quiet hallway, taking the long way back to class. He'll never remember that I let him lead the way. Sometimes it occurs to me that maybe the reason Tony kept his grip so loose was because it

gave him the option to break free, if he felt like it.

But he never did.

In all those days, he never ran.

Maybe I'll see Tony again, when he's older. Not much will have changed—he'll still have those sweet baby blues, that puckered pudge, those green rubber clogs—but he'll be taller, bigger.

I might ask, "Tony, remember me?"

He won't, but I'll ask anyway.

I no longer mean anything to Tony, if I ever did. I can't expect him to treasure those six weeks he spent in summer school, when I was his one-to-one aide. It's an unfair burden.

Instead, I imagine Tony filling the gaps in his memory that might include me with words he might someday speak, arranged in bright plastic letters.

The sun anchors our solar system... But a person cannot anchor the world.

When I sit beside my grandmother in the courtyard of her facility, wiping melted ice cream from her sleeves, she thanks me with a smile. Once she reaches the end of this disease, she'll stop that too—an undeniable side effect of the final stage of Alzheimer's is that the afflicted forget how to smile.

We can't communicate with words anymore. We can barely communicate at all. I rely on memories she no longer has to fuel our attempts at conversation.

My mother often says, "I hope you remember her for who she was, not who she is."

But while we're both in the present tense, I will angle her wheelchair into a stretch of sunlight and sit beside her, letting the silence swell between us, thinking of ways to tell her she's still solid.

Maybe someday I'll find the words.