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Things Not Seen

“Tests? What tests? I thought you said it was just Ivan’s ear drum.” My hands shook as I clutched the phone.

“Don’t worry, darling. Those CAT scans are probably just protocol since he fainted. One sec...the doctor’s sticking his head in...”

“But Daddy, he’s *okay*, right?”

“He’s going to be just fine, except they said he’s definitely not fit to fly – “

Call Ended.

The tears I’d been stifling for the past two hours finally surfaced. “I’m so, so sorry, Grace,” Mom stroked my back as I slumped at the edge of her bed. “I know y’all have been working so hard to get ready for Paris. But I promise you’ll make it eventually, even if it’s not this anniversary.”

“It’s – it’s not that at all – “ I choked. “I don’t care about Paris. I just want Ivan to be okay.” My own years of ER trips foreboded those CAT scans might not be standard protocol. Was Dad telling me everything?

“It’s your anniversary tomorrow, honey?”

I grimaced as the nurse redressed the feeding tube protruding from my stomach. “Which one?”

“First.”

“That makes more sense...you look so young I thought he was your boyfriend!”

I’d stopped tallying how often I heard that, but I still forced a smile so she wouldn’t feel awkward.

“How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty-three.”

She clucked and shook her head.

“I’d ask if you have plans, but I guess we both know the answer to that one.”

Four weeks earlier I’d been hit by a car that ran a red light as I was crossing the street. A severe traumatic brain injury, two strokes, two brain bleeds, and multiple internal injuries should have ended my life that night. They didn’t. When I was still breathing the next morning, doctors wondered if I would have cognitive function when I woke from the coma. I did.

That sympathetic nurse couldn’t realize just how much our anniversary was ruined. Ivan and I forwent a traditional honeymoon since we got married while he was in grad school, but we’d planned to fly to Indonesia and meet his family around our first anniversary. Until I got hit by a car. “Celebrating” anything while I was partially paralyzed, on a restricted diet, and unable to put weight on my restructured legs might have seemed absurd. But all those injuries meant I was very much alive, and my being alive meant we were very much married. And *that* was worth celebrating, even in a sterile white hospital room with my roommate blaring her crime show on the other side of the curtain.

Ivan was late to dinner that night. He'd spent the day moving from our rickety second-story apartment to a first-floor handicap unit, and I realized it must have been raining since his coat was nearly soaked when he slung it over a chair beside my bed.

But as Ivan gulped down his plate of hospital fried rice and I picked at teaspoonfuls of mashed potatoes (I'd just been upgraded from "nothing by mouth" to "soft foods"), I noticed more to worry over than a wet jacket. Ivan's eyes are large and rounded in spite of his Asian background, and I was startled by how narrow and strained they suddenly seemed.

"Hey, Ivan?" It took me a couple of tries to get his attention. My roommate certainly was enjoying the volume on her TV.

"I'm not mad about all this – are you? It's hard to be mad when things could have been so much worse. I mean, think about it. They said I should have died that night." These thoughts bolstered me on days when I was tempted to give up. Had it been a mistake to assume Ivan felt the same way?

"I know." The weight behind his eyes made me wonder if he was afraid I couldn't handle what he really thought.

"But we both still think God has some sort of purpose since he kept me alive, right?" I ventured, hoping his eyes would release a little.

He nodded.

"Right." I echoed myself, still watching his eyes. "I'm sure this will all make sense at some point. And hopefully we can have a *real* anniversary next year!"

Our second anniversary was nothing like the first. That's what I'd hoped to post on my blog in December 2017. I'd imagined resuming our lives as free-spirited newlyweds once I was

discharged from the hospital at the beginning of the year. But we discovered that managing my recovery was a full-time job, and my mom moved into our three-room apartment in Riverside, California, to care for me while Ivan finished school. He graduated five months later - around the time I was classified as legally disabled – and found a job near my parents’ home in San Jose so they could care for me while he worked. As for me, I started a blog and an online English degree to exercise the only portion of my brain that hadn’t been permanently damaged – the verbal portion.

Our second anniversary was nothing like the first. That particular lede never made it on the blog because our second anniversary was almost identical to our first. I’d developed violent, medication-resistant seizures, and my neurologist had admitted me to an epilepsy monitoring unit for further diagnosis.

My eyes crawled along the gauze tail that connected my wire turban to a machine at the upper left-hand corner of my bed, a machine that was recording my brain waves twenty-four hours a day. The tail was long enough for me to sit up in bed – and shuffle to the airplane-sized bathroom a few yards away – but how long was the tail of my accident?

“Your anniversary’s in a couple of weeks,” Mom interrupted my thoughts as she passed me a second coffee. Some seizure drugs were worse than sedatives.

“Um, yeah...” I hedged. “I’d hoped it was going to be better than last year’s, but.” There was nothing to follow the “but.” My seizures were still unexplained and I’d already decided I was making our second anniversary even worse than our first had been.

“It *is* better than last year’s,” she corrected, brushing some stubbornly blond curls behind her ear. “You have each other and you’ve made it another year in spite of some pretty awful circumstances. And you still believe in God’s plan, right?” I sighed. Mom was right. Ivan probably said she was right, too, although I can’t actually remember.

I also can’t remember what we did for our anniversary.

Those drugs must have tampered with my memory.

CARLA’S COUNTRY KITCHEN. I think the letters were scrawled in large white cursive across a royal blue awning, but I’m not sure. My eyes were closed so I wouldn’t have a seizure from the bright headlights still shining at 7:30 am. It was December 30th, 2018 – our third anniversary and the first one on which I’d managed to stay out of the hospital.

By this time Ivan and I knew my seizures were permanent, so we were too nervous to stray far from my parents in case something went wrong. But we were also determined to try *something* on our own, especially after two years of doing nothing. We finally settled on two nights in Morro Bay, which was our original “mini honeymoon” and only a couple of hours from San Jose.

Morro Bay was our favorite pre-accident memory of just the two of us enjoying each other, and Carla’s seafood omelets were our richest Morro Bay experience away from the boardwalk. Ivan wanted to scrap the Carla’s breakfast in favor of microwaved oatmeal at our

Airbnb so I wouldn't have a seizure from car headlights in the early morning, but I said absolutely not. My only concession was closing my eyes until we were safely inside.

And so we shuffled into Carla's stuffy dining room fifteen minutes after its sign blinked "OPEN." This could have been the day after our last breakfast in 2015 for all it had changed. I considered joking about our own sameness – or lack thereof – but decided the pills I was swallowing with my starter coffee probably made the joke for me. Ivan, ever the philosophizer, commented that the only part of us that *was* the same was our belief that things happened for a reason.

I was right. Dad wasn't telling me everything about those CAT scans. Not only had Ivan punctured his right ear canal, but he had also fractured his right jawbone in three places and his cheekbone next to his sinuses. The hospital was scrambling to fit him in for jaw surgery.

I canceled our flight to Paris the next day.

Morro Bay had slaked our thirst for a "real" anniversary at the time, but it quickly become mere bait for that thwarted international honeymoon. Another year of hospital visits and worsening neurological conditions convinced us that if we waited for me to get better, we might never go. Our original plan to visit Ivan's Indonesian relatives was out of the question since we couldn't risk a third world country with my disabilities, but Europe offered an advanced healthcare system along with its centuries of history. My obsession with modernist literature and Ivan's fixation on Chopin made Paris an alluring choice. What better destination for our fifth anniversary next year? But when the school where Ivan taught choir scheduled a European tour

over spring break, we realized seeing Europe for the first time together meant visiting *now*, even if we had less time to prepare.

And so we bought two non-refundable tickets in September and spent the next ninety days plotting our Parisian adventure. Our itinerary was conservative yet – to us – perfect: The Musee D'Orsay, Notre Dame, a day of Christmas marketing, chamber music at Saint Chapelle (for him), and lunch at Les Deux Magots with an excursion to the Bouquinistes (for me). While my parents visited Europe frequently – and were probably worrying over which safety hazards we'd ignored – they limited their proffered help to an oversized suitcase, a French language book, and a ride to the San Francisco airport. They understood this was *our* trip, our self-actualization as independent adults. As the days until our departure dwindled, I wondered if this anniversary might also meet another increasingly desperate need. Perhaps, surrounded by the glamour of Paris, we'd finally glimpse that elusive greater meaning behind my accident.

Ivan came down with a stomach virus four nights before we left. I wasn't particularly worried – didn't those peter out after twenty-four hours? – but I grew puzzled when I heard a thud, then silence, then scrubbing after he headed for the bathroom around 2 am. I decided that he must not have made it to the toilet in time, but I finally investigated after the scrubbing continued for twenty minutes. I was horrified to find him seated by the bathtub, blood trickling out of his right ear.

When I asked what happened, Ivan only shook his head and pointed to a string of text messages on his iPhone. Apparently he'd fainted and thought he damaged his ear drum, then texted my parents, who were already on their way. He explained later that he hadn't called out to me in case I panicked, flipped the wrong lights, and triggered a seizure. He'd spent twenty

minutes scrubbing blood off the floor – and himself – for the same reason. Ivan wouldn’t speak to me after I *did* discover him since his mouth was still full of blood. Mom and Dad arrived a few minutes later: Dad rushed him to the ER while Mom took me to their condo to soothe me while I waited.

Two weeks later, Ivan and I sat facing each other in my parents’ spare bedroom, where we’d been living since Dad brought him home from the hospital. It was December 30th, 2019. Our fourth anniversary. Mom, undeterred by post-surgical restrictions, had tried her best to evoke a romantic atmosphere. Her “gourmet” menu consisted of roasted cauliflower soup with slices of toasted baguette for me, a translucent cauliflower-water adaptation for him, and sparkling apple cider for both of us. No table was the right height for Ivan to reach his “soup” from the recliner that kept his head at the proper angle, so she’d positioned the bench from the family piano beside his arm rest instead. I ate beside him on my knees. Dimmed lights, a Spotify playlist, and – voila! A romantic, convalescent, pseudo-European anniversary dinner.

But all I could think about was our first anniversary at the hospital. Ivan’s head was swathed in bandages from his surgery and his jaw was wired shut. Now *he* was the one on a restricted diet. Unlike me at our first anniversary, Ivan couldn’t even talk, at least with his own voice. He’d become surprisingly fluent in Google translate, although I was still off-put every time my husband sounded like a computerized woman.

Would we ever grow up? We didn’t have a “move home” date on the calendar since I couldn’t take care of Ivan by myself. His recovery from this surgery alone would be at least six weeks – not to mention that second jaw procedure the surgeon kept mentioning. I’d blamed my

accident for all our problems, but apparently accidents could happen to Ivan, too. Wasn't there some sort of "enough" button to push on life? As in "Have experienced enough trials, have earned right to nice life." Or at least a "Deserve answers now, please," button. I was twenty-six. My health only got worse. We'd only had one normal year of marriage.

"Thanks for being the bestest wife ever. Smiley face."

An automated female voice punctuated my thoughts and forced me to laugh. My favorite part about Ivan's "phone voice" was that it read emojis verbatim. "I love you too, sayang," I said, using his Indonesian nickname. Our anniversary wasn't a total failure. We were still together. We were even stronger.

But what about the bigger purpose that was supposed to make sense of our lives? I couldn't see that anywhere. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* The phrase from my childhood comforted me, in spite of that plane ticket cancelation sitting in my inbox and my husband sipping soup-water from a food syringe. I realized that, just like at the hospital, I could still choose what to think. Did I really need Paris to believe in a good God or a purpose for our lives?

"You know what? I think we can still say this is a good anniversary." I reached up and touched Ivan's hand, hoping he'd understand what I meant.

"Let's do year five in Paris. Smiley face," the phone voice chirped back at me.