

THE LAND OF BABBLE

“Please bring your seatbacks and tray-tables to the upright position.”

Ohmigod, how much do I not want to get off this plane. I haven't seen Dad in, what, three years? Not since my sister Lauren's wedding, where he and my stepmother, Paula, didn't even stay for the father-daughter dance. Lauren pretended she didn't care, but I knew it bothered her.

“Jane, I'll let you take your car to college next year if you'll go see your father just this once,” Mom had said. I should have told her I'd rather walk. Too late now, though. The flight attendants are saying, “Bah-bye,” and now I can see my stepsister, Carla, waving at me from just beyond the baggage claim sign.

“How many bags have you got?” She asks after engulfing me in an awkward hug.

“Just one...I'm only staying until Monday.” Just until Monday. I can make it for three days, I tell myself. Plus, I get out of school on Monday. No calculus quiz – that's got to count for something.

We make our way to her car and drive along in silence for a while. I stare out the window at the scenery that should seem familiar, but doesn't. I lived here in Colorado until I was eight, when my parents divorced and my mom moved my sister and me to Washington. Dad married Paula the following year and now I have a stepsister and stepbrother I hardly know.

Carla is going on about a garage sale they've been having today and how hectic it's been. Some story about a woman trying on clothes in their bathroom that is supposed to be funny, but I'm not really listening. I smile and nod and desperately wish I were anywhere else.

We park and walk past the junk-filled tables lining the driveway into the house. Paula is nowhere to be seen, but my dad is sitting in a recliner in the family room. I am shocked that he looks so gaunt and I think I could probably push him over with my index finger. Carla tells him I am here to see him and he stands up to look at me. “Hi Daddy,” I say and put my arms around him in a hug. He stands stiff as a board and doesn’t move his arms, so I pull back and look into his face. I see confusion and anxiety there, but no recognition. He doesn’t know who I am.

This is why my mother insisted I make the trip; so I could see my father once more while he still recognizes me. I wonder if it is too late for that. Six years ago, my father was diagnosed with primary progressive aphasia. That’s a communication disorder that basically impairs his ability to speak, read, or write. It starts out with what seems like some difficulty thinking of the correct word and gets progressively worse until it ends up virtually indistinguishable from Alzheimer’s. In fact, I sometimes tell people it is Alzheimer’s when I don’t feel like explaining the reality of the situation. That’s when I tell people about it at all, which isn’t very often.

Paula breezes into the room and insists, “It’s been such a hectic day and he’s just tired, that’s all.” We sit and talk a little about his condition. “He’s gone downhill so much in the last year. Until the last several months, he seemed to understand most things, even though he couldn’t communicate himself,” she says. I should mention that not being able to communicate doesn’t mean that he doesn’t talk. He talks all the time, but it just comes out as nonsensical syllables. It’s kind of funny because the man I remember barely talked at all – now that he can’t communicate, you can’t get him to stop talking.

Paula and Carla are telling me about the recent changes in his personality. “He flies off the handle for no apparent reason these days and just stands there yelling unintelligibly at people. It’s so unlike him,” Paula says. This seems an odd statement to me, as the man I knew was

always angry about something and I never knew why. To me, the stranger is the one sitting across the dinner table happily chatting away about nothing at all. He must have been such a different man with this family than he was with mine.

I look closer at his face. “Where’s his other eyebrow?” I ask.

“Oh, that,” Paula says. “We had to take away his regular razor and replace it with an electric one.”

“He gets a little distracted sometimes,” Carla adds. She points out that he’s missing quite a bit of hair at the hairline as well. I try not to laugh, but it seems better to laugh than to cry.

The following morning, I am eating breakfast in the kitchen when Dad walks in with tears in his eyes. He tries to say something and then he puts his arms around me and weeps into my shoulder. He has realized who I am. This is more alarming than when he didn’t know me at all. He is a generally stoic military man and I have never seen him show emotion. Ever. I’m not sure I’m going to make it through this weekend.

But after the crying jag, he seems fine again. He talks animatedly to me and I listen and nod. “Dadadadada bababa dada,” he says with a smile. He laughs in the appropriate places and seems to understand what’s going on around him. While Paula and Carla finish up the garage sale, we take a long walk and he seems to enjoy it immensely. There’s even a moment as we’re eating lunch when he looks at me and says, “This is good.” Clear as a bell. He holds my eyes for a moment, and then he’s gone. Back to the land of babbling syllables.

On Sunday afternoon, Paula tells us that we are going to the birthday party of someone in their church group. I hate crowds, especially when I don’t know anyone, so I am not thrilled about this development. I smile and say it’s fine, because that’s how my family deals with things.

The party is actually nice, for a while. Everyone seems to know and like my dad. They all come and talk to him and say they are glad to see him. After a while, though, it's just me sitting with Dad. He has become quiet and withdrawn and I don't know what to say to him. Eventually, we say our goodnights and walk to the car. Dad is becoming agitated about something, but no one knows what. In the car, he begins to yell at Paula. Exasperated, she says, "Bill, I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're trying to say."

"Dododo nanana know shit!" my father says.

We all try not to laugh. "Well, at least you're clear on that," Paula says.

As we walk into the kitchen of their house, my father turns on me and begins to scream a stream of syllables at me that don't mean anything on their own, but together they mean he wants to rip my head off. He points his finger in my face and I fear is about to push me into the wall when my stepmother wrenches herself between us and forces him out of the room. I walk silently into the living room and burry my head in the fur of their dog. My eyes are dry. I don't know how to cry for this.

Five minutes pass. Ten. Then my father comes back into the room. I stand to face him and see that he is crying again. He hugs me and I believe he is saying he's sorry. Then he's off to bed.

After the rest of the house is asleep, I dig in my purse for my cell phone. My mother answers on the third ring with a sleepy, "Mmmello?"

"Are you happy now, Mom?"

"Janie?" she asks, suddenly alert, "What's wrong?"

I tell her about my trip so far.

“You went there for me?” she asks. “Oh Honey, if I had my way, you wouldn’t leave my sight until you were at least 35. And there would be no boys...ever. I sent you there for you. To say goodbye...or hello – whatever you needed. I just don’t want you to look back later and regret anything.”

There’s a long pause followed by a heavy sigh on my end. “Why didn’t you just tell me that?” I ask.

“I don’t know, Honey. Communication’s not exactly something our family has ever done well. What are you going to do? Do you want me to come out there to get you?

“No. I need to figure this out for myself. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I sit in the family room thinking until I see the first light of dawn. I can’t believe my plane leaves in a few hours. Just as I’m wondering if I should try to make some coffee, Dad walks in holding something to his chest. I gently pull it away from him so I can see what it is. He’s holding a picture of Lauren and me on a swing-set. I must have been about five and Lauren ten. It’s out of focus, but I can tell we’re both laughing. I look up at Dad and he says, “Mine.”

Yes, Daddy. Yours. Always yours.

At the airport, my father hugs me and walks to the car without looking back. I wonder if I’ll ever see my father again. I wonder if he’ll ever see me. “Goodbye, Daddy,” I whisper. I don’t quite make it to the sliding doors before the first tear falls.