

JENNIFER HEDGES

RETURN OF THE COYOTE

“WHERE’S YOUR MOTHER?”

My father’s first words always when I arrived alone.

“Migraine.”

He nodded. His second question—“What’s it like out?”—was his first when she was with me.

He sat with his back to the window, the way the staff had parked him after lunch. There is probably a reason why they want patients to face the door but surely it wouldn’t be the patients’ preference.

When my mother and I toured the veterans’ wing of the hospital before it became my father’s home, we exclaimed over the view from the fifth floor—a memorial garden, then a deep wide field of grass, dotted with trees, and beyond that, a woods. No sign from here of the two major city streets that formed the hospital’s west and north boundaries.

“He’ll love it,” said my mother. We had the notion that nature would sustain him. As long as he could see, we believed, he would need nothing more than the opportunity to look out a window.

I turned his wheelchair around to show him the rugged thunderheads that filled the August sky.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” he said.

I pointed to the clouds, wondering how he could miss them.

“I don’t know where I’m supposed to be looking,” he fretted.

I crouched by the side of the chair to check his glasses. He looked at me with eyes that were huge behind the lenses of his reading glasses. “Wait here,” I said, as if there were any possibility of him moving.

In the drawer of his bedside table I found his distance glasses. The frames on both pairs were identical. The staff probably grabbed the nearest pair when they dressed him in the morning, not realizing he had two, with entirely differently prescriptions. I hid his reading glasses at the back of the drawer. For a moment I considered taking them home—he’d never

read again—but he needed them to sign the cards I bought for him to give my mother on her birthday, Mother’s Day, and at Christmas. His signature was becoming smaller and smaller, and I had to remind him he didn’t need to include his last name.

I handed him the proper glasses. He looked at them a moment, then looked at me.

“Want me to put them on?” I asked.

“Whatever,” he said in the surly tone of a teenager. I almost laughed.

Once I settled the glasses on the bony bump of his nose and hooked the arms over his ears—I kept expecting him to complain, to warn me to go gently—I pointed out the window again. “What kind of clouds are those?”

He didn’t reply for almost ten seconds. I was about to repeat the question, a notch louder.

“Cumulonimbus,” he said. “There’ll be a storm tonight.”

That evening as I lowered the blinds in my bedroom, which faced the direction of the city where the hospital was located, I saw the sky light up behind the trees.

After spending a winter alone in the house my parents had lived in for nearly sixty years, my mother decided to move into a seniors’ residence. When she cleared out the house, getting it ready to sell, she offered my brothers and me some of the things we had given my father over the years. My brothers got dress shirts—some still in their original packaging—and tools. The box she handed me included three copies of *The Weather Wizard’s 5-Year Weather Diary*. Every day for eleven years and five months, he filled in temperature, wind speed and direction, the presence of precipitation and clouds, and whether the barometer was rising or falling. Humidity he didn’t bother with, perhaps because he grew up on the Prairies where humidity is insignificant. In the space for Observations, he noted the first appearance each spring of robins, red-winged blackbirds, and Tundra swans.

The last date he filled in was the day before he fell in the parking lot at the bank, where he tripped over uneven concrete. Hardly had he hit the ground, than he was up, hoping for no witnesses. Another customer walked with him into the building and guided him to the information desk.

By then, a lump was forming on his forehead. The manager wanted to call an ambulance.

“I’ve got ice cream in the car,” said my father.

“We can put it in our freezer.”

My father insisted that he felt fine.

“We’ll have to do an incident report,” said the manager.

“How long will that take?” said my father, still thinking of the ice cream.

Afterwards, one of the junior bankers popped his bike into the trunk of my father’s car and drove him home, then cycled back to work.

What the doctors would later call “the dementing process” probably started that day when he failed to fill in the weather data. Knowledge gained in hindsight: you identify the first robin to arrive, but not the last to leave. He continued to drive, to bank, and to shop, but he wore the same clothes, day after day. He showered only once a week.

“He smells,” said my mother. “Haven’t you noticed?”

He smells. He smells the roses. Such a difference.

“He forgets to pay bills. He takes messages for me on the phone and forgets to pass them on. Or he tells me, but he hasn’t heard properly who called and why, so the message doesn’t make any sense.”

I listened, trying to figure out if she just wanted to complain or expected me to suggest solutions. I worked as a supervisor of a library department before I retired. I was used to solving problems, but any time I tried to give my mother advice I came across, apparently, as bossy. That was the word I overheard her use about me to one of my brothers.

In the next seven months he fell at least four more times—on the basement stairs when he tried to grab a cotton handkerchief that floated from the top of the laundry basket; in his room when he decided not to turn on the lamp when he got up to go to the bathroom in the night and smashed into the bedside table; in the kitchen when he turned too quickly, lost his balance, and tobogganed, headfirst, on a mat, into the wall.

Other than bruises, scrapes, and bumps, his only diagnosed injury was a broken rib the time he fell down the stairs. It was already healing before he admitted to my mother that he was in pain and asked her to drive him to the hospital.

The day after Boxing Day my mother found him in the basement, his face covered in blood, trying to find the door out of the room next to the garage. He must have gone out to clear the driveway. The snow blower was

in the garage and the long cord lay in a scrambled heap, instead of being carefully coiled around the handle, which was how he left it ordinarily.

Turns out he'd had a heart attack. Over a period of several weeks, his heart healed as well as it ever would, but, as my mother was careful to tell people, the blows to his head had a cumulative effect that would never go away. She made it sound like he was a former athlete suffering from the long-ago effects of a sports-related concussion.

"It's not Alzheimer's," she would say, though no one could know for sure. She meant it as comfort—my brothers and I should not feel doomed.

In the package of information given to my mother when my father was moved to the locked wing of the veterans' hospital was a pamphlet, "Communicating with the Dementia Patient." The pamphlet advised us to keep questions simple and specific. Not "What did you do today?" but "Did you have walking class?"

"What did you have for lunch?" I asked.

Even this simple question was too difficult for him. The food, puréed because he had trouble swallowing, was not recognizable, and he could not read the slip of paper that came with it. A straightforward list of every item on his tray, with no fancy description, it looked like the first draft of a banquet or *prix fixe* menu.

"Did you have lunch in the dining room?"

And if he had, he would answer, "You might call it that."

And then I would wonder if he was referring to the meal or the room, but it got too complicated to ask.

"The world's a mess," I told him in the idle chat mode I used to use with co-workers I didn't really know in the library staff room. "Floods. Suicide bombings. Wars all over the place."

"I heard something about that," he said.

I wanted to believe he had been watching the news on the televisions two of his roommates had suspended above the foot of their beds.

He shared a room with three other men, all of whom ignored each other except occasionally when the guy beside my father and the guy across the way argued about whose military service was more important.

"I carried a gun!" Bob would shout at John. "You carried a bloody frying pan."

An image flashed through my mind of John creeping up to the enemy, dispatching him with cast iron. He was, of course, a cook.

“I wore a uniform!” John would shout back.

“Would you like a television?” I asked my father.

“Not really.”

Some of the veterans on my father’s floor were able to propel their wheelchairs by shuffling their feet along the floor. The rest, like my father, stayed where they were put. One of those mobile patients whose room was down the hall came into my father’s room. My father glared at him.

“Get him out of here,” he said to me.

“Are you looking for your room?” I asked the other man.

He stared at me, his head to one side, as if putting his better ear towards me.

I got up and wheeled him into the corridor. One of the orderlies was bringing around a cart of washcloths and bibs and diapers.

“Come and help me, Carl,” she said to my father’s unwanted visitor.

“Does Carl come in here a lot?” I asked my father when I returned to his room.

“Who’s Carl?” he said. Then he must have figured it out because he added, “He was here the other day and he fell out of his chair.”

“Really? Was he hurt?”

“Not really. They had a devil of a time getting him up, though.”

Half of my mind was picturing the scene—Carl was considerably overweight—the other half was worrying that my father could fall. I checked his seat belt. It was the secure kind: staff used a pen or pencil through an opening in the buckle to release it.

“They had to use a contraption,” said my father. “Kind of a homemade job. It wasn’t very good.”

I could tell by the way he spoke that he believed he could have devised something better. And, before he got sick, he could have. He once built a treadmill for my mother using scrap lumber, the handlebars of an old bicycle, twenty pieces of dowelling, and a length of rubber, the kind you cut up and nail to stairs to make them safer.

When I mentioned Carl’s fall to Geri at the nursing station on my way out, she had no idea what I was talking about.

“It must have been when I was off,” she said in a way that suggested that no such thing would have happened on *her* shift.

But I knew that if someone had fallen, all the staff would be aware of it, even if they weren’t on duty when it happened. Everyone would need to know in order to recognize after-effects.

When I told my mother about his detailed account of something that hadn’t happened, she just said, “He’s always had vivid dreams.”

My mind, too, began playing tricks on me. One day I opened the kitchen curtains and glanced down the condo driveway. Heading my way was a scooter—the mobility aid, not the funky Vespa-type—larger than any I’d seen in the past months of noticing them. I would see them plugged in along the hall in the retirement home where my mother now lived, or zipping around in my father’s hospital. There was even a foldable model advertised on TV.

This scooter would be too large for the elevator of my mother’s building, but might fit in one of the patient transfer elevators at the hospital.

Unlike any I’d ever seen, this scooter had room for a passenger behind the driver. He stood, one hand on the driver’s shoulder for balance, the other holding a cane. The scooter slowed down and the passenger hopped off, his cane a magic one that turned into a weed whacker. And the scooter was magic too. It turned into a riding lawn mower.

Other than asking “Where’s your mother?” and “What’s it like out?” when his mind was clear, and “What are we waiting for?” when it was not, it was rare for my father to initiate a conversation. Therefore, it was a small miracle when he said, “All the talk around here is about a coyote.” He pronounced it *ky-ute*.

For a moment it was as if I were visiting a man recovering from a heart attack and he would get better.

But then I remembered his story about Carl falling from his wheelchair and my excitement over the coyote quickly evaporated. Nevertheless, I turned his wheelchair to face the window and pulled up a chair beside him and suggested we watch for it. I called it a *ky-oh-tee*.

“It’s not the right time of day,” he said.

“True.”

After a minute I said, "But it's also true that they're making a comeback in this area. Like the opossums that hitch rides north on eighteen-wheelers."

The hospital, bounded on two sides by parkland and woods, was a perfect setting for a coyote. As we sat staring out the window, we talked about the nature of coyotes. They are usually shy. You wouldn't expect to spot one easily. For a couple of weeks, whenever I ran out of things to say, I would ask if he'd heard any more about the coyote. His answer was usually no. Sometimes he sounded sad, other times annoyed, as if he wished he'd never mentioned it.

I found a book, *The Hidden Life of Deer*, at the library and started to read it to him. It usually put him to sleep. In early June I told him about the doe that I had spotted in the ravine below me as I stood looking out to the lake, and how she locked eyes with me as if to keep me from spotting her fawn in the shadows beside her.

Late in August I said, "I suddenly realized the robins have gone."

He nodded. "They leave early."

"Remember the robins that nested in the cedar outside your kitchen window?"

My father's chair at home had faced the window. Every year he watched two sets of eggs hatch and two sets of fledglings learn to fly, dates noted in his weather diaries.

"Did they come this year?" he asked.

"Of course." I didn't have the heart to remind him that someone else lived in his old house now.

After a while he said, "Well, I'd better stir my stumps."

It was a phrase he had used throughout his life when it was time to get down to some task or other, but I would cringe, aware, as he was not, of the amputees in rehab on another floor of this hospital. On fine days, several would gather outside the main entrance, just beyond the large red painted half-circle on the pavement that marked the non-smoking area. They had scooters or motorized wheelchairs, which they tended to drive at high speeds. I always suspected they had lost their limbs as a result of car accidents.

"What do you need to do?" I asked. How wonderful if he would say he had to go visit a chap down the hall or play euchre in the common room or work on the finish of his latest woodworking project.

He thought for a minute or so, then, “I forget.”

I was reading the last chapter of *The Hidden Life of Deer* when I became aware of the sound of running water. I turned to my father to ask if he could hear it. He seemed to be asleep. Suddenly, I noticed a puddle forming under his chair and leaped to my feet.

“My father’s” How to phrase it? The nurse waited. “He’s had an accident. You’ll need a mop.”

“Ah,” she said. “He’s sprung a leak.”

It must happen all the time. She paged an orderly. I told her I’d be back and made my way to the basement cafeteria.

My father started to fail, to sleep more, and to be unresponsive when we spoke to him. His hair grew wispy and stuck up in little feathers like a baby bird’s.

In September I tried to describe the beauty of a tree I’d seen covered in monarch butterflies.

“Mexico,” he whispered, and we both knew that he meant to say, “They are migrating to Mexico for the winter.”

Every little sign of lingering intelligence

He was moved into a palliative care bed.

Early one October morning I was awakened by the phone. It was still dark when I picked up my mother. We said little on the drive to the hospital. I kept thinking of the turkey vultures that had drifted overhead when I walked the dog the afternoon before. I had counted them—42—so I could tell my father exactly how many. I let my mother off at the entrance to the hospital, and drove over to the parking lot. The sun was starting to rise. As I locked the car door, I glanced beyond the parking lot to the woods, thinking this fall’s brilliant colours would soon be evident. Trotting diagonally away from the fence was a coyote.

I couldn’t wait to tell my parents! I was seized with the same urgent excitement my mother must have felt decades earlier when she rushed to the door to shout out to my father in the garden that I had just taken my first steps.

I ran to the building, fidgeted when the elevator was not waiting, and, finally, when it arrived and took me to the fifth floor, fairly skipped down the

corridor. I must have forgotten why we were there at this unusual hour. For a moment I was a little kid, running because I knew how. As I approached the nursing station, Geri shook her head. For a moment I thought she was warning me to slow down.