Havazik

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When you arrive, Ramon is busy by your father's bed. He wheels aside the table, pulls the walker into place. It's the second time he's drawn your dad, and you're relieved to see him. He is calm and gently competent. He doesn't get upset like Biljana, yesterday's aide who couldn't understand why your dad insisted on speaking to her in a language (Hungarian) that she (being Bosnian) could not comprehend. On Ramon he's trying Portuguese.

"*Como é você*?" he says. "*Como é o tempo*?"

You give Ramon a look. You hope it conveys your apologies for — and helplessness regarding — whatever your father says. The first day when Ramon explained that he was neither Portuguese nor Italian and grew up right here in Cleveland, your father replied, "So, what are you — Dominican?" Without waiting for an answer, he launched into a story about Roberto Clemente. You spent the first two days sighing, "Dad, please," or "Dad, would you stop?" but you no longer waste your breath. He will not change. He will continue to believe that any woman in the room is, naturally, his nurse. "When will I be seeing the doctor?" he asks the attending physician each time she stops by. Perhaps she's accustomed to this because she does not pause — loosening the brace, checking the incision, asking him to kick out his legs and wiggle toes — and does not respond.

He will look for any opportunity to speak one of the five languages, besides English, with which he claims acquaintance. You knew about Italian, Portuguese and French — remnants of a New Bedford, Massachusetts, boyhood — plus a smattering of Korean, courtesy of the U.S.

Army. That your father knows some Hungarian — quite a lot, it turns out — is news to you. Ramon calls your dad "my friend." Your father is a favorite (with everyone but Biljana, that is) because he doesn't complain about therapy. Indeed, in the rehab hospital, your father is having the time of his life.

"Look," Ramon says. "You have a visitor."

Ramon presses the bedrail button. Slowly the bed tilts your father up. He holds a sideways hand to his mouth and whispers to Ramon, plenty loud for anyone to hear, "I think I piddled myself. But don't tell my daughter. *Capeesh*?"

"*Capeesh*," Ramon agrees.

Latching on to Ramon's arm, he twists in your direction. With the brace he cannot turn his head right or left. It holds his chin thrust up, lower lip jutting out. This gives him an air of defiance, wariness too as his eyes cast about until they find you. Then he grins. You catch the gleam of his way-in-the-back silver tooth. He waggles his fingers and greets you with the silly name no one has used since you were 5. It's embarrassing. But it doesn't really displease you.

"Ramon, have you met my daughter?" Now you wince. You know what's coming next. "She's a professor. Can you beat that? She teaches at — what's it?" His mouth continues to move but for several seconds no words come out. The attending physician says it's a lingering effect of the anesthesia that should, eventually, lessen.

"Dartmouth!" At that, he rolls back onto the pillows and lets out a breath. "That's it. In New Hampshire."

"No, Dad, not Dartmouth."

You step up to the bed, your boots bumping into a metal trash can. The small room is a crowded jumble. Yesterday Biljana had sworn repeatedly, bumping into nightstands, sending

flimsy hospital phones flying to the floor. "Shit!" she cried. "*Szar*!" your father shouted with great gusto. "*Merde*!" he added, punching the air with a weak fist and giving you a sly grin. He liked — this is how he would put it, if he could find his everyday words — to get Biljana's goat. In the corner is a folded-up wheelchair that will take him to therapy. Above is the bulletin board on which the recreational therapist pins a new inspirational quote every morning. The recreational therapist is, as you'd expect, an exceptionally sunny man. He bounces in and bounces out of patient rooms. For the holidays he wears bell-tipped elf boots. His choices for inspirational quotes are, however, unsettling. Today's is *It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.*

"Restless night?" you ask Ramon.

He nods, opening the wardrobe and patting the upper shelf for the clean undershirts and bottoms your mother restocked yesterday. (She, too, is almost 80 and usually on her own, because, while you don't live in New Hampshire, you do live far away.) "That's what they tell me," Ramon says. "The army was on the march again." He turns and regards your father with a patient smile. "My friend, nighttime is for sleeping. Nighttime is for staying in bed. You want something, you push this button."

"That reminds me," your father says. He ignores the call button to which Ramon points. He grabs hold of the bed rail and tries on his own to twist. One try, two tries, and then he falls back, looking exhausted. "How's my roomie this morning?" he calls out after a moment. "*Como é você*?"

"Harold's not here, Dad," you say.

"Mr. Taylor went home yesterday," says Ramon. "You remember?"

Until yesterday your father had a roommate, an elderly African-American gentleman named Harold who had suffered a stroke. To Harold he'd talked endlessly about, of all things, Macon, Georgia. Macon is where he used to stop, staying at a Holiday Inn, every year on his way to the annual sales convention in Jacksonville. This was many years ago, before he retired — involuntarily, the company about to go under — but since the surgery, everything has seemed like just yesterday. Sometimes it's 1971. Richard Nixon is president. DDT has yet to be banned. Sometimes it's the 1950s and your father is somewhere in Korea. He is marching, crouching, rushing, ducking, and sometimes, you're told, sobbing. But Korea is only at night. During the day — so long as no one asks a tough question like "Can you tell us what year it is?" or "Who's the president now?" — he is all silver-toothed grins.

"Me and Skip Greenburg," he'd say to Harold, "we go across the highway to that rib place — what's it? You know the one?" Harold, of course, had given no indication of ever having visited Macon, Georgia. "That Skip," your father continued. He was looking up at the ceiling, eyes blinking. "Wonder what he's up to now." Skip Greenburg had been a pesticide salesman, too. He is dead now, had died — if you remember right — of an undiagnosed aneurysm. It had happened when he was by himself in the room of another Holiday Inn, not in Macon. This too was many years ago.

In these conversations Harold regarded your father with polite attention and said nothing. Because of the stroke, he couldn't speak. Harold could, however, sing. Every afternoon, accompanied by the music therapist strumming an autoharp, Harold sang in a clear, sweet tenor. Your father, a boisterous baritone, joined in: "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore" and (perhaps responsible for the memories of Macon) "Georgia on My Mind." But then Harold, having mastered the putting on of socks and having achieved bathroom independence, was discharged to

the care of his son and son's wife in Cleveland Heights. At least until after the holidays, his bed is expected to stay empty.

Your father, shipping out every night in his dreams, is not a restful roommate. Last night, Ramon tells you, he made it all the way to the nurses' station, babbling words no one could understand, his cotton johnny soaked. You can't imagine how he did it — without even a walker, according to Ramon. Rods and pins hold together his disintegrating spine. Beneath the sheets his legs look like crooked twigs.

"Slide your arms in," Ramon tells your father. He's teaching him, again, how to get dressed. "Roll from the bottom. See? And now just tuck your head through."

For rehab your mother had packed smart tracksuit sets. But the hospital is warm and there's the problem of accidents, so you've switched him over to V-neck Fruit of the Looms (size XL to slip easily over the brace) and scrub pants (navy, to help hide the stains) that you picked up four-for-$10 at the Westlake Wal-Mart. Ramon reaches for a fresh pair of pants. Your father starts to peel back the sheets. Ramon reaches out a quiet hand and stops him. To you he says, "Give us 20 minutes?"

Outside in the booth at the parking lot entrance sits a lone security guard. Today he's dressed like Santa Claus, a welcome splash of red against gray asphalt, stone and sky. You give him a wave, then call your husband, trying to think of something that might buck him up. Every month for the past three months his office — your state's job training and placement center — has been hit with layoffs, 20 at a time. Who knows who's next? You are wavering between words of reassurance you do not have and an irrelevant bit of news — for example, it's supposed to snow — when he tells you that your daughter has been arrested. Or not arrested. Summoned. To juvenile traffic court. She was going 88 on a twisty, two-lane road.

The wind has come up, gusty and cold. It cuts through your coat, sends a crumpled burger wrapper shooting across the parking lot. Your daughter is nonchalant. It's just the police around here, she says. They're cracking down on that sort of thing. "So are we." This is the most you can manage. You have started to shiver so much it's an effort to press the phone to your ear. It is always, with her, the worst that you imagine: the most unforgiving curve, the one marked by a homemade cross in remembrance of the last thoughtless teen, your daughter sailing over the guardrail and into inky oblivion or else into a hospital just like this, the ward reserved for those not expected to recover. Please deal with it, you tell your husband. No, you're not sure, you say, how much longer you'll be needed here. It may be for a while more.

With these words comes warm relief, the same you felt yesterday when the nurse manager *tsked* at your father's inability to manage the pants pull-up, his fogged confusion regarding questions of time and place. When she said, "I'll see if I can get him another week," you felt such gratitude, such thanks. No, really, you tell your mother, whom you call next. You are happy to spend your holidays here; your husband and daughter will get along fine. It isn't just, you explain, that Dad is still not himself. Here, in the rehab hospital, he's more himself — a gleeful joker, an unexpected linguist — than he's been in years. In therapy, you're told, he laughs off the complicated metal rigging that fuses together his neck and spine. "If you want to improve your TV reception," he quips, "just stick me on the roof." He's taught the patients recovering from painful knee replacements how to swear in Italian and Portuguese. In occupational therapy, they're teaching him things he's never done for himself: fix a bowl of cereal, make his own bed.

Your mother has agreed to stay put today. She's promised her own mother (who greets Meals on Wheels volunteers with, "Go help someone who needs it. I've got a daughter") a trip to

Kroger's before the arrival of the forecasted snow. It's been decades since you lived in Ohio. What you recall is, the snow doesn't drift down flake by flake, slowly thickening to a storm. It comes all at once, furious and dense, lasting three minutes or three days. You study the sky. It looks the same as yesterday. Then it's back inside and up to the third floor, where you find your father speaking in a language you do not know with a sturdy-set woman you've never before seen.

He's sitting up, dressed for the day, legs dangling over the side of the bed. The woman — a nurse, you conclude; she releases pills from their packets into tiny plastic cups — says something to him. He holds up three fingers, then adds a pinky to make four. She nods, drops one more pill into the first cup. When she lifts it to his lips, what she says has the cadence of "Here you go" or "Down the hatch." You hold out the Styrofoam cup you've just filled with fresh water and a new bendy straw. Kati is the nurse's name. It's pinned to her pastel-patterned smock and written on the chalkboard next to today's inspirational quote. She appears to be in her fifties and speaking to your father in — it sounds nothing like French, Italian, Korean, or Portuguese — Hungarian.

"He's a natural," Kati tells you. She grew up, it turns out, in a west-side neighborhood where parents held tight to the languages of left-behind homes and the Lutheran church conducted services in German, Hungarian and Czech. "You could tell me you're from Budapest," she says to your father, "and I'd buy it."

"Never even got close," he replies. "I thought they'd send me to Germany, but next thing I know, I'm in Korea."

They, you realize, is the army. Of course. It was the Cold War. Maybe he'd taken an aptitude test. Or at induction he'd put his multilingualism on display: *Che pezza di merda* or

something worse. In language school he seems to have done well, and you can imagine what should have come after: a lonely listening post in the Black Forest, close to a friendly village with a cozy pub. He might have added Bavarian-inflected German to his linguistic repertoire. The woman who is your mother might never have been his wife. But because they sent him to Korea instead, he became the man you've always known: settled in Ohio, selling pesticides on the road, occasionally drinking too many highballs against the pain of a very bad back. "Why can't we go camping?" you and your brother would ask when you were small. "I camped enough for one lifetime in Korea," your father would reply. It's as much on the subject — of camping and of Korea — as he ever said.

"Lift your head up." Kati is coaching him from bed to walker to waiting wheelchair. This she does in English, pronouncing each word slowly, emphatically, to cut through the snow that piles up in your father's head the second he's confronted with any basic task.

"Eyes where you're going, not on the floor. That's right. The wheelchair. Now I want you to lift the walker, set it down, then you step. Got it? Lift, down, then step."

Hunched over his walker, the cumbersome brace pushing his chin up and out, he looks like a wizened turkey. It shocks you, how stringy and small he's become. With each surgery — lower back, upper back, hip — he shrinks. The next time you get back to Ohio, he may have disappeared. At Kati's instructions, he gives a heavy scowl and picks up the walker. Then he sets it down, points at you, and says something. The only word you catch is "Bennington."

"Really," Kati says. She smiles at you. "He must be so proud."

"No," you say. "Not Bennington, Dad."

But Ramon has returned, braking the wheelchair and holding it steady. Kati eases your father in. "*Allons-y!*" he commands. Towards the door they back. You are about to sit down in

one of the room's several uncomfortable chairs. While he is in physical therapy and then OT, you will sit here and read, or watch the television hanging high on the wall, or look out the window above his bed, a bare courtyard and another hospital wing, just like this. At lunch, Ramon will cover him with a towel, then pull back the table far enough that your father can see the food he must navigate over the brace and into his mouth. "Don't feed him." That's the order of the occupational therapist, though your mother usually does. Later, when he returns from afternoon therapy tired but happy — he has made so many friends — you will feel sleepy, dull, but contented, too, concerned only with what your father has ordered for dinner tonight ("Not the soup, Dad. Yes, meatloaf. That's a good choice") or what to watch on TV (the news to help with who's president, what's the season, what's the year). Should the storm move in, Harold's bed is free. Maybe you'll learn about Korea, or maybe, singing, you'll ease each other into dreamless sleep. With morning will come the recreational therapist wearing merry boots and bearing disturbing quotations: *When you jump for joy, beware that no one moves the ground from beneath your feet.*

So you are startled when Kati says, "Why don't you come, too? He'll need someone at home who knows the routines."

Jumping up, you are about to say, "But it won't be me." Won't be. Cannot be. Face it: The holidays will shoot past, a new term will begin. Your husband will shrink from the humiliation of filing an unemployment claim just next door to the office that laid him off; your daughter, stripped of her license, will start taking rides from a scowling boy. How hard it will be to convey her, happy or at least whole, into adulthood. At most you have one more week here. Then you realize your father — in his wheelchair, Ramon backing him out the door — is trying, frantically, to speak.

“It’s, it’s —” Although his lips keep on moving, the next word won’t come. He lifts a finger and points. A slow smile spreads across Ramon’s face. Kati spins about. Beyond the window the courtyard has been erased by sudden swirling snow.

“*Havazik*!” Kati cries, clasping her hands.

“*Havazik*!” cries your father. He is grinning, gladdened by the snow or the sound of his voice returned.

“Ha-va-zik,” says Ramon. He regrips the wheelchair handles. “Time to go, my friend.”