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Warnings We Do Not Heed

3148 Words

Claustrophobic

Daniel hated MRI machines. For no other reason other than he believed all men should be free from medical constriction – especially where electromagnetic radiation was concerned.

“And don’t say I’m claustrophobic,” Dan insisted to his wife after she asked him what the doctor had said. “Just because lying inside a medical tube for forty-five minutes makes me feel like I’m being buried alive. Everybody feels that way.”

“Sure, but isn’t that just another way of saying claustrophobia?” Rebecca teased.

“I am *not* claustrophobic.”

“So says the big, tough educator.”

It was true. Daniel was a teacher -- a principal at a rurally depressed, southern district high school -- who’d spent the last 26 years working with teens at risk. Some difficult. Some dangerous. Many with potential who, in the end, knew they were going nowhere and hated school because of it. During his time as an educator, he’d broken up fights, talked suicidal students off ledges, dealt with furious parents, fired recalcitrant employees, and testified at school board meetings. He’d even once spent seven hours locked inside a classroom with twelve detention students during a bomb threat -- but that turned out to be nothing.

“I’m so *NOT* claustrophobic,” Dan insisted.

"Honey, you won't use a photo booth. You refuse to go into the janitor's supply closet at work. And you even walked up five flights of stairs last year when I had my appendix out just because you didn't like that the hospital elevator was full of people."

"That was for cardio."

"While wearing a suit and patent leather dress shoes?"

Daniel looked at her. Then laughed.

Rebecca laughed back, purring, "Claustrophobic as the day is long."

"Fine. Maybe. But only mildly."

"So tell them."

"No way. If I tell them, they'll insist on sedating me for the procedure. I'm not taking drugs just to lie still inside a tube for their convenience."

"Then enjoy your tube."

The MRI was supposed to answer a simple question – had Daniel torn his meniscus while playing basketball with several teachers after school two weeks ago. He'd come down badly from a rebound, felt something pop, and spent the next two weeks limping around saying he was fine and refusing to see a doctor. Till Rebecca caught him crawling across the floor because bending his knee hurt too much. She immediately made an appointment to see Dr. Bennett.

"I believe you've torn your meniscus," Dr. Bennett explained. "A radial tear most likely. Nothing dramatic. Very common. But it can be serious, and seriously painful, if left untreated. We need an MRI to properly diagnose it before I can treat it. Which may require surgery. But just so you understand, my friend, not doing anything is out of the question. It won't get better on its own."

Daniel arrived at the imaging center at 3:15pm on a Thursday afternoon with a promise he'd be home by 4:30. The technician, Megan, introduced herself before starting the screening process.

"You ever had an MRI before?"

"No."

"Any metal implants?"

"No."

"Pacemaker?"

"No."

"Shrapnel?"

Daniel stared at her.

"You'd be surprised."

"No. I'm a high school principal. Not a mercenary."

"Okay. What about jewelry? Anything on your body or pierced in places I can't see?"

"No. Just this." Daniel removed his wedding ring and handed it to her. "That's it."

"Good. You can leave your clothes on as long as there's nothing metal attached. Zippers, buttons, that sort of thing. Anything metallic?"

"No."

"Good. We're only imaging the knee, so I'll slide you in feet first. That way your head stays pretty close to the opening."

"I would appreciate that."

Megan looked at him. "Claustrophobic?"

"No."

She continued looking at him.

"Maybe a little."

"I can get you a mirror so you can see outside."

"That sounds worse."

"Okay, no mirror," Megan smiled. "Now let's get you up on the rack and start the torture."

Daniel smiled. "As long as you tell my wife I was the bravest man you ever met."

"Deal."

Daniel laid down on the sliding bed while Megan positioned his knee inside a plastic coil. Then gave him ear plugs. "You'll hear some loud banging. Totally normal. These'll help."

"I've listened to teenagers playing drums. I'll survive."

"This is worse." She handed him a rubber bulb. "Squeeze this if you need me to stop. It'll relay a signal to my display."

Daniel held it up. "My eject button?"

"Basically."

"Good."

Megan moved out of sight behind the glass and engaged the MRI. Daniel's bed slid into the machine, stopping only when he had fully submerged.

"Jaysus, Joseph and Mary," Dan muttered. The white plastic tube was barely inches above his face.

"You okay?" Megan asked.

"Fantastic. Just peachy keen."

"Try to relax. We're starting now."

The machine began hammering away, knocking and banging in a way Daniel did his best not to panic over. But the first five minutes were petrifying. The next five worse. Then the machine changed rhythms – buzzing and pulsing mechanically, like a construction worker operating an industrial jack hammer inside his skull. Sending him into fear overdrive.

Till it suddenly stopped.

Dan opened his eyes to silence. Everything quiet. *Did I fall asleep?* He wondered.

"Megan?" he called out. No response. He squeezed the bulb. Nothing.

"Megan??" He tried to lift his head, but couldn't. His breathing quickened. "Megan???" He could feel the table beneath him. The soft earplugs in his ears. Even the cool air blowing through the bore. But his body wouldn't move. Or respond to his command.

"Megan!!!" he panicked. No answer. Then someone whispered in his ear. Too close. Really close. Right in his ear. An old man's voice.

"Don't let them know you're awake," the old man spoke.

"What? Who said that?" Dan panicked. No reply. Just silence. Then he heard the old man's voice again. Right next to his ear. "Be still."

"Who's there? Who said that?" Daniel stared at the white plastic above him.
"This isn't funny."

"No, it isn't."

"Where are you?"

"I'm here."

"Where is here?"

The old man didn't answer. But from outside the tube, Dan suddenly heard Megan talking. "He's not responding."

"Megan?" Daniel tried to call, but couldn't speak.

"Dammit, he's not responding. Daniel? Daniel! Wake up! Daniel! Oh, crap."

Am I dreaming? He wondered. It doesn't feel like I am. It feels like I'm trapped inside this MRI machine and about to lose my mind.

Dan heard an alarm sound. Then people begin flooding into the room. But still he couldn't move or speak.

"What's going on?" a male voice, maybe a doctor, asked.

"He's not responding. I'm not sure why."

"Pull him out then."

"I tried, but the machine isn't responding either. There's power, but the release isn't engaging."

More voices entered the room. "What's going on? What's the emergency? Did someone fall asleep again?" All wrong.

"I'm here!" Daniel screamed, but nothing came out. No one could hear him.

"What happened?" yet another voice asked.

"I'm not sure," Megan replied, "Everything seemed WNL. But then the display went all wonky. And when I checked on the patient, he was unconscious and unresponsive."

"Well, let's pull him out. The manual release lever is on the outside panel."

Daniel felt himself moving, but still couldn't move or speak.

"Pulse?"

"Nothing."

"Okay," a male voice insisted, "Start compressions."

Something struck Daniel's chest. Once, twice, three times. Again. And again. And then again. In a rhythm of chest compressions he recalled from his last CPR class when the instructor explained compressions should match the beat to a famous BeeGees song. "*Staying alive, staying alive, ah, ah, ah, ah...staying aliiiiivveeee.*" How ironic. Except the instructor hadn't mentioned how painful the compressions would feel. "STOP! THAT HURTS! You're going to break my ribs!" Dan tried to scream.

Dan lost track of time as voices from inside and out seemed to come and go. He knew this was an emergency and needed help. He tried to get someone's attention. Anyone. "HELLO!? CAN ANYBODY HERE ME?!"

The old man whispered again, more urgently in Dan's ear this time, "You really need to lie still and quiet down. If they hear you, they'll come quicker and find you."

"What?! Who will come? What's going on?! Who are you?! Are you with the medical staff?! Are you messing with me?" Daniel yelled, at least inside his head.

Several voices responded in unison -- protesting. Till the old man's voice cut through the noise and told them all to quiet down immediately. Then calmly to Dan, "They will come if you keep making loud noises. And that won't be good for you. Do yourself a favor and learn to whisper. Be as quiet as you can if you must speak."

Dan's blood went cold. He took a deep breath, slowed his anxiety and whispered, "Okay, how's this?"

"Better."

"Who are you? Where are you?"

"My name is Earnest. Ernie to my friends. I'm here next to you."

"Ernie, what's going on? I don't understand. How long have I been like this?"

"I can't say how long. Time is not an easy concept to track in here."

A woman spoke up, "I've been waiting for seventeen years. My name is Patricia."

Another voice. "Twenty-three for me. Eileen."

A child whispered: "I don't remember how long. But Mommie used to call me her little Buttercup. So everyone calls me Butter."

Daniel tried to move. Get a better look, but still couldn't. "What is this? Why am I stuck?"

The old man answered. "You're stuck because you're dead. Same as us."

"I'm NOT DEAD," he panicked. "No way I'm DEAD!"

Patricia replied, "Oh dear." Butter laughed nervously. So did a few others. But not pleasantly. Their tone suggested fear.

"I AM NOT DEAD! Why are you saying this? What are you trying to do!?" Dan could feel them around him – the disembodied voices. And it scared him. But not as much as what the old man said next.

"We're just trying to help you. Keep you safe here with us."

"Safe from what?"

"Oh, dear, they're coming," Patricia cried in a whisper.

"You really should've listened when I told you to whisper and lie still," the old man continued. "Now they've heard you. That's not good."

The voices disappeared and Daniel felt something change. Not in the machine, but behind it. Inside it. Somewhere deep below it. Something had noticed him and was coming. He could feel that something moving. Not mechanical. Not the MRI machine itself. But something creeping upward from it. Crawling towards him.

A scratch. A pause. A shadow emerging.

"What is that? Jaysus, what is that!?" Silence grew as the scratching shadow emerged. Across the MRI machine. Creeping across the room. Taking up more and more space as it came. Looking for him.

Dan wanted to scream, but the old man whispered fiercely in his ear. "Hold. Still. Immediately. Last. Chance."

The shadow alerted, then crawled up and over the MRI machine looking for Dan. Then, just as quickly, it receded and disappeared.

"Oh boy, that was close," Ernie whispered. "You're one lucky s.o.b, son."

"What was that? Why was it looking for me?"

"I don't really know what it is. Death probably. Maybe the Devil? Or an evil spirit. It comes for the loudest of us. Those who've died but don't know they're dead and can't stop reaching out. That's what they're looking for."

"I'm not dead."

"If you don't accept, they're sure to come back and find you. Eventually. They always do."

"What does it want?"

The child, Butter, answered this time. "To leave, same as us."

"What does that mean?"

"If they find you, they'll invade you. Get inside you. I don't know what happens after that, but it doesn't sound pleasant when it happens."

"We've seen it happen to a few people over the years," Patricia explained. "They get into the dead body, stand it up, make it talk. And then walk it out of here like a puppet, I suppose. It's not good. The soul screams that come from those people are bloodcurdling."

"No. No, no, NO! THIS ISN'T HAPPENING! THIS IS A DREAM! I AM NOT DEAD!!"

"Oh dear," Patricia whispered. "Here they come again."

"Don't say we didn't warn you," the old man whispered. "We tried to help you."

Daniel woke to several masked faces staring down at him. He screamed and tried to sit up, but hands quickly grabbed him.

"Daniel!"

He fought back, swinging wildly.

“Daniel, stop! It’s me! It’s Rebecca.”

“Rebecca?” He stopped. Then looked up to see his wife beside him. In a hospital room. Not an MRI machine. Not a clinic. A real hospital. Rebecca next to him. Dr. Bennett standing at the foot of the bed. A nurse checking his IV fluid bag. Sunlight. Bed. Monitors. Rebecca crying.

“What happened?” he asked.

She hugged him. Daniel could barely breathe. “How long?”

“What?”

“How long was I gone?”

“Gone?”

“How long was I in the machine?”

Rebecca pulled back. “You had a seizure.”

“What?”

“They think you had some kind of seizure during the MRI. Your heart rhythm went crazy. You lost consciousness.”

“I died.”

“No.”

“They pronounced me dead.”

Rebecca stared at him. “No, they didn’t.”

“Yes. And there were people inside the MRI machine.”

"People?"

"In the machine."

Dr. Bennett and the nurse exchanged a look. He saw it.

"I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. I know what I heard."

"Yes, of course" Dr. Bennett soothed. "You've had a terrifying experience."

"That's therapist language."

"Well, I'm not a therapist."

"So don't use it."

"Dan, honey, take it easy." Rebecca squeezed his hand. "You're alive. And you're safe now. Dr. Bennett has been looking out for you. And I've been here every second since it happened."

Daniel looked at her. That should've been enough. But it wasn't. He wanted to know.

The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with him. No epilepsy. No brain lesion. No stroke. No explanation why a routine MRI caused him to lose consciousness. For all their training and experience, Dan was found to be a healthy thirty-nine year old male with a minor meniscus tear to his right knee. Which made Dan laugh out loud after Dr. Bennett told him.

Three days later, after corrective surgery for his meniscus, and a lot of reassurance from Rebecca, Dan went home feeling exhausted. Like he'd been to war and back again.

For the first week, he slept downstairs with the television on at all times. And when he moved upstairs into the bedroom, he listened to music constantly to drown

out the sound of scratching that had followed him home. When he tried to sleep, when he showered, when he ate, even during rehab, he could hear it. Especially when other people spoke to him.

He stayed quiet. Inside and out. Only whispering when he spoke. Which was unnerving. And worried Rebecca a great deal.

“My husband has never been what you’d call a chatterbox,” she explained to Dr. Bennett, “but he was always social and friendly. Very friendly in fact -- often striking up conversations with anyone he comes in contact with whether he knows them or not. But since the incident, he barely speaks. And when he does, he only whispers. Always whispering. Like he has a secret he wants to share, but can’t get it out.

Dr. Bennett hadn’t seen such a reaction before. Not because of a minor surgery. But he did offer a referral to a good psychologist he knew. Maybe Dan was having an existential crisis and needed to talk with a professional – someone who understood life and death questions and could help remind Dan he was alive, healthy, had friends and family who cared about him and wasn’t going to die.

Rebecca agreed and set up the appointment. It also gave her an idea. On the following Friday night, she hosted a small dinner party – inviting a few friends over to help lift Dan out of his anxiety and depression and get him back to normal. Let him see how much he was loved. Some friends, family, several people from work, and even his best friend from college who’d moved to Montana.

The dinner party didn’t help.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Scratch. That's what Dan heard. So he whispered. Making it hard for others to hear him above the din of people talking nearby. Mostly, Dan just sat at the table, smiling, listening, and, when he could, reassuring everyone he was fine.

A week later, sitting in the office of Dr. Amon Emmet, Dan listened to the doctor's assessment of the situation. Seizure. Hallucination. Some bizarre neurological event. His brain had taken two minutes and stretched them into something enormous. There were papers about it. Time distortion. Near-death experiences. Auditory hallucinations. Everything had a name. Names helped.

But behind Dr. Emmet's couch, Dan heard scratching. Which he wasn't going to tell the doctor about lest he be labeled crazy.

Dr. Emmet prescribed the anti-depressant, Lexapro, and suggested they continue meeting weekly till Dan's depression subsided.

That night, for the first time, Dan heard scratching under his bed. Rebecca was asleep beside him, lightly snoring. Him reading a book about mid-life crises in men.

Scratch. Pause. Scratch. Pause.

His entire body went cold. The sound felt inevitable.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Followed by scratching.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Scratch.

They'd heard him. And were coming. Daniel held perfectly still while Rebecca snored softly beside him.

"Don't let them know you're awake," Dan imagined the old man saying. So he closed his eyes, trying to lie still and praying for the sound to go away. But the noises wouldn't stop. Then something pushed against the underside of the mattress making the bed rise slightly. Rebecca stirred. Daniel wanted to scream. But Ernie had told him, "They find the ones who don't know they're dead. Who are loudest and won't accept."

Daniel began crying. Softly at first, then hysterically.

Rebecca rolled over. "Daniel? Honey?" He did not answer. "Daniel, what's wrong?" The scratching stopped. Daniel opened his eyes and looked at Rebecca.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because they're here."

The mattress shifted. Something moved underneath.

"Is there something under the bed?" Rebecca asked.

When she climbed out of bed to look, Daniel whispered fiercely, "Don't! Don't do it. Don't move. Don't speak."

"Why?" Rebecca asked. But it was too late.

Dan knew it was too late, hearing the old man confirm, "Too late."

Something struck the mattress from below lifting it up. Rebecca yelped, jumping away from the bed. Daniel panicked and rolled off the other side, but he landed hard and re-injured his knee. And then came face to face with the scratching darkness beneath.

As the darkness enveloped him, and Daniel felt himself being dragged under, hyperventilating as he went, a last, ironic thought occurred to him, "*I am NOT claustrophobic.*"

The End.