

Battleship

by Marko Fong

You compare the brightly-colored wires sprouting from the bandage wrapped around your stepson's head to a bouquet of flowers. The tech sits in a chair next to Brett's hospital bed and holds up line drawings of common objects: cats, boats, skyscrapers, bridges. After Brett calls out the name of the drawing, the neurologist types the result into a laptop then announces "19e", the coordinates for some exact spot in his brain where his seizures might live. It would be easier for you to watch this if the neurologist didn't have Sam Jaffe's hair.

Fifteen years ago, five years before Brett's car accident not long after you started dating his mother, you found a photo on the web from Ben Casey, a medical show you watched as a kid. You were trying to show him the symbols for "Man, woman, infinity", but Brett wound up laughing hysterically at Sam Jaffe's wild hairdo instead. He laughed so hard that you laughed too.

The doctor with the funny hair was one of his outlier memories along with phone numbers and the faces on baseball cards. Why can't he remember where he lived in sixth grade or the name of his first girlfriend? He spent six weeks waiting by the phone after she dropped him. The bigger problem is that Brett now often can't remember what happened five minutes ago. Without short term memory, he graduated college but can't hold even a minimum-wage job.

They turn up voltage for 17f and Brett calls out "Window". 23m is "telephone pole" and he does his thing, "I left the rest of my brain in a telephone pole at forty miles an hour."

Your wife and you smile, but don't laugh. The technician does neither.

"Glad you didn't lose your sense of humor," says Sam Jaffe.

"Nice hair there, Doc."

"We've still got a bunch more. Can you hang in?"

"Do I look like I'm going anywhere?"

Everyone laughs this time, but as you try to visualize the map of Brett's brain in your own head, you know that "not going anywhere" has more than one meaning.

As you stare at his IV tube, you remember your astonishment when, weeks after emerging from the coma, Brett confessed to his mom and you that it went on for three years. The only thing you could say in the moment was, "Your seventh grade basketball coach? You told us you were babysitting for him."

You repeated those two sentences three times. Even if boys didn't usually baby sit, Brett had real charisma with younger boys. You even imagined that he'd be a counselor or a teacher some day, maybe he'd coach. It didn't occur to you that the coach, a single father with part-time custody, wouldn't have much need for a babysitter, at least not that often.

Brett claimed that he suppressed the memory until years later he drove into the pole on a clear night, but he never suppressed the confusion and anger. The road was dry. The police thought he'd been drunk until the drug/alcohol test came up clean. After the coma, this secret was one of the things he remembered and had to reveal. After the coma, you kept asking yourselves, "Couldn't we have asked one more question back then?"

Why couldn't he have remembered something like sitting in the

living room and playing Battleship instead? How he had that knack for finding all your submarines and destroyers. How you never had a clue how he was going to arrange his fleet behind that screen. One time he even had them all lined up in a row-one vessel plopped against the next. You didn't even have a clue until he'd already sunk your blue flagship at 6b.

You bet him a hundred dollars he couldn't beat you that time. He knew you were joking, but he kept teasing you by saying "Mmmm, I'd buy that for mom, but I'm a hundred dollars short."

You gave him the hundred dollar bill for Christmas that year. His mom thought it was a bad idea, but now you have no regrets because Brett thought you were the coolest person in the world that morning. He even hugged you.

After the accident you reminded him of the story three times, but it won't stick and he won't play Battleship any more. You tried a couple times, but he kept naming coordinates he'd already just tried. "It's a kid's game," he told you.

When he said it you tried to memorize the face. He's an older version of hundred dollar Brett. He still loves to joke. He was the boy the girls always called instead of the other way around, except once. One of your friends used to say, "He's going to fit right in to fraternity life some day. I know that wasn't your thing, but he's going to have fun." Where are the coordinates for that Brett? Was there ever a battleship at USS Sigma Alpha Brett? Your wife had thirteen years with that Brett. You had eleven months. It's the same face, only he's now past thirty and whatever's behind it changed and can't find its way back.

If this surgery works, the neurologist says they can get rid of the seizures - three a week for eleven years, five trips to the emergency room in the last year. If they find the spot, they don't even use a

scalpel, just a high-precision vacuum because the brain is actually the consistency of pudding.

“Remarkable,” you say. As you wonder if they can do the same for your heart.

