

BETTER NOT TELL YOU NOW

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Not lost, not lost, not lost, I tell myself. He's simply misplaced. In the east parking lot of the university campus, I try not to replay Akash's high-pitched and panicked voice in my head. Plunking my canvas bag on the passenger seat, preparing for the hour's drive back home, I notice my rapid, shallow breath and recognize the familiarity of this internal chaos I struggle to govern: suddenly dropping my priorities to deal with whatever crisis someone believes is unfolding.

From Akash there had been no hello, only a rush of words: "I can't find Jess anywhere. I came to meet him at the end of his shift, like always, but he's not in the produce department. I don't know what to do!" There's no magic answer except, "I'll be there soon:'

Most Likely

To redirect panicky thoughts, I grip the steering wheel hard enough to flare arthritis pain. Aching digits somehow a portal from current anxiety to past emergencies I've survived. Driving home from the missed university class will provide time to convince myself we'll survive this predicament too. We—Jess's sibling, Jordan, who's been recruited to start calling places Jess might have gone, Akash (the job coach), and I—will find him.

Without a Doubt

The ways of childhood are behind us, both Jess and I. He's twenty-one on the outside, but seven on the inside. I remember being seven,

holding the weight of a favourite toy in my hands, heavy and smooth. A standard Magic 8 Ball has twenty answers: five non-committal, five negative, ten affirmative. Players ask a question, then shake and invert the ball to reveal one answer, the die suspended in dark liquid, against the plastic viewing window. With all the burning questions of childhood, I would sit on the couch in my father's office, legs tucked under my orange and pink flannel nightie, and shake the Magic 8 Ball. Will Marta invite me to play after school? Happiness flooded my small body if an affirmative response floated up. Will I go to the Hi/Lo Candy Mart today? In the early morning chill of the house before parents awoke,

It is Decidedly So

I know better than to wonder if Akash will find Jess. Nothing will reassure me. A Magic 8 Ball won't offer the childish encouragement it once did. I have learned, in mothering Jess and trying to understand his brand of neurodivergence, my adult attempts to control the uncontrollable with information-gathering and pre-planning offer zero solace. Asking questions of experts on Google often makes it worse. It's best to stay in the moment. All I can do is get home, even though I wish I could shake that Magic 8 Ball and re-experience a seven-year-old's sense of certainty from its predictive outcome.

Cannot Predict Now

Thoughts roiling, flashing counterpoints to continued steering wheel squeezing, spikes of pain coincide with the slap of windshield wipers against the aggressive January rain.

Only three weeks ago, on Christmas Day, my mother couldn't read the tags on her presents.

"Whose is this?" Mom asked, gift in hand.

"It's for you," said my dad.

"Where's the tag?"

"Here;" he pointed and continued unwrapping his own present.

"I don't see it! John! Where is it?" she said with panic in her voice.

My father pivoted, set his red-papered package beside him on the couch, studied her face, searching.

"Do you see that?" He held his hand over part of the gift tag, revealing only my brother's name.

"No."

With careful deliberation, "Carol, what does B-E-N spell?" There's a breathless silence while her brain, suspended in its cerebrospinal fluid, tumbles for an answer. "I don't know" surfaces like a Magic 8 Ball answer.

By the time my parents became convinced to go to Emergency, Mom needed help getting boots and coat on—her brain too busy experiencing its third ischemic stroke, in as many years, to tell the body how to dress.

Outlook Not So Good

My brain's on fire. Out of this memory it shouts: Where is he? Jess is not a balter. Something must have happened. Right now, I'd welcome the equanimity and optimism of my seven-year-old self who could believe I would go to Marta's after school because the Magic 8 Ball said so.

Ask Again Later

I've been avoiding making future plans for Jess. But a time when he won't live at home anymore is foreseeable. While the thought of him

living apart from us makes me teary and heartsore, I sense an urgency to prioritize myself before time runs out. Even if we wanted Jess to live away from us—perhaps in a group home—funding is scarce. In my dark imagination, the group home is a dingy space cleaned by Jess and his co-residents. Adaptive equipment and clumsy people bang up walls. Unnecessary decor costs money. Spills happen. Carpet and upholstery stains remain. I hope for well-meaning staff who do their best, not ones who could violate my son in ways sometimes broadcast on the six o'clock news. He will live on society's margin, leave his middle-class childhood behind, his existence invisible to most. Jess has no agency to take advantage of his current life. My determination for him will exist only in memory. I long to direct and control his future past my demise, even if I realize the futility of that yearning.

I can't dwell on that, I lecture the flapping windshield wipers. There's no Google or Magic 8 Ball guidance available. But his future hovers in the back of my mind always, whether I'm awake or asleep, with him or not.

Reply Hazy, Try Again

Passing the one-storey small businesses that populate Hastings Street, I'm almost home when the phone rings. Not Akash, it's my father. In case of bad news, I pull over to concentrate on his voice over the Bluetooth speaker. He's calling about Mom, who—since before the last stroke—has avoided eating. Weighs ninety-three pounds. Says everything tastes like chalk and has no saliva to swallow. Over time, she's developed the patina of an eating disorder. Dad takes so long to gather his thoughts and express them, I stop attending to words, and listen instead for tone: is everything okay?

Signs Point to Yes

He's worrying to the point of sleeplessness and of making himself sick. Boxing up concern for my parents, pushing anxiety about Jess to the back of my mind, what comes out of my mouth resembles counsel he would have offered a younger me.

"Dad, we've done all we can. We can't force food down her throat. She has to decide whether she's going to follow what the experts recommend." He agrees. And yet. He's been googling. He lists his internet-fueled worries.

"I know, Dad. But nagging won't change her. We can't ruin our relationship or our time with her. Our job is to love her." I don't tell him about Jess. He'll only worry. How odd, it suddenly strikes me as I hang up, that Dad had a Magic 8 Ball in his office so long ago. He's never been interested in prophecy, preferring ideas and facts.

Still hoping I'll hear from Akash, I realize my father's ability to sift important information is slipping. He fixates on remote possibilities. As if options revolve in his brain, but never settle on one answer, tumbling like Magic 8 Ball responses. I choose not to worry that my father's current state is my future.

Before I can resume the drive home, the phone rings again and it's Jordan.

"Mom, Akash brought him home."

"Oh, thank God," I breathe.

"Your line was busy; he called the home line. I guess a customer tore into Jess for not answering her questions about sweet potatoes. Didn't understand why the store didn't have what she needed and didn't acknowledge Jess pointing to his 'I have autism and don't speak' name tag thing-y. He's okay. Akash went home."

I disconnect, rest my forehead on the steering wheel, close

my eyes. The counterpoint of tires on puddled asphalt drones through the windows. Now and then my small car is buffeted by a large truck, too close. These outside world noises recede as I inhale my relief: Jess is safe. I absorb the immediacy of Jordan's voice like a warm hand stroking my back.

Outlook Good

I pull back into traffic, brain full of thoughts about elderly parents and young adult children. My heart yearns to make changes before changes are made for me. As if loss and letting go are a race I can train for and win. As if I can prepare to stop being a daughter soon. As if I can practice for when Jordan will move out. When Jess will leave.

Back home, after family members are accounted for and hugs are exchanged, I notice our Magic 8 Ball on the desk and pick it up. I pause. Scan for the right question. Shake it.

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