

THE RUMINATION ON WHAT ISN'T

The right move.

BY ALEX SHVARTSMAN

This isn't a time-travel story. As you sit in the sterile room that looks and feels like a hospital ward but doesn't smell or sound like one — you know the difference after so many months — as you stare at the thing at the other end of the chessboard and try to picture your daughter instead, you ponder the choices you've made. You realize that, if given a chance, you wouldn't go back to change anything. There is no decision, no single action that would have altered the course of events. No moment in time that could have been modified to avoid this outcome. No matter what, you would find yourself in this room, lost in thought as your fingers caress a white pawn. She is waiting for you to make your move.

This isn't a horror story. You certainly felt like it was, on that day in the doctor's office, when he delivered the diagnosis with practised compassion. Words like *stage four* and *metastasis* sounded surreal. They were fears of old people; there was no place for them in the life of a ten-year-old girl. You remember feeling shaken and detached, as if this was happening to somebody else. But the oncologist wouldn't allow you to process this fully, to despair, to grieve. He wanted to talk treatment options, and DNA sequencing, and clinical trials. And he wanted decisions to be made right away, because there wasn't a lot of time.

But it wasn't all fear and dread. There were moments of happiness, when the two of you giggled while watching cartoons together, or went picking apples under the pleasantly warm September sun. There were moments of boredom, hours spent in waiting rooms filled with year-old magazines and stone-faced strangers who probably understood what you were going through

better than your closest friends, but were barricaded behind the walls of their own distress. And then there were mundane moments, because even when your world is shattered you still have to go through the motions of picking up paper towels at the supermarket, and getting the oil changed in your truck, and doing laundry.

This isn't a fantasy story. When her hair fell out from the chemo, and she lost weight, and the doctors began to mention the word hospice, you sought alternative treatments. Folk medicines and psychics, and any number of other things that don't work, but desperate people try them anyway, because they're better than doing nothing. This isn't a fantasy, there's no magic or miracles. She kept getting worse.

This isn't exactly a tragedy. Before the illness could take her, lawyers in expensive suits showed up and offered you a way out. It was an experiment,

they said. The procedure had never been performed on a human being before. There were plenty of risks and unknowns, but your daughter was given an opportunity to make history. More importantly, it was the way for her to survive. You hated the thought of her being used as some sort of a guinea pig, but the doctors said that she had just a few weeks left. This was her only chance. So you signed endless pages of legal documents until your hand ached almost as much as your heart, and you allowed yourself to hope.

This is a love story. You sit in the sterile room and play chess against a sleek metal box that houses your daughter's mind. She has been uploaded, the first herald of the coming singularity. She will never again pick apples, or play soccer, or hug you. The scientists don't know whether her mind will continue to develop or if she will remain a perpetual ten-year-old. They don't know whether she will live forever inside the machine, or if her consciousness will degrade and disappear with time. The entire world is waiting to find out.

She watches you through digital cameras and hums her favourite tune through the speakers, impatient for you to finally make your move. And you know with absolute certainty that this is a love story, because you love your daughter just the same, regardless of her physical form. You get to tell her stories, and watch cartoons together, and play chess, and face whatever challenges may come in the future as a family.

You smile at her, and push the pawn forward. ■

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