

Wait for the Flash

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Doctor Sanchez called it prosopagnosia. Face blindness. It was caused by damage to the fusiform gyrus on the surface of the occipital lobe. A football injury. A pickup game. Casual, no pads. They weren't supposed to tackle, but Scott had tackled, and when Jeffrey awoke, he didn't know the person leaning over him—until she said his name. *Jeffrey. Jeffrey. You're awake.* It was his mother.

Those first few weeks felt like a recurring dream—in his socks atop a slick geodesic dome, trying to get his footing, inevitably slipping, and waking to the abrupt wallop of gravity. His mother wanted him to rest, but it was hard. He tried to watch TV, but he confused the characters. Couldn't follow the plot. He turned it off. Each person was a puzzle. Uncle Dave was clomping feet and armpit smell. Ms. Robison, next door, was cinnamon over cigarettes and cat-in-arms meowing. He knew his grandmother by the clutch of her thin fingers, the skin paper-dry.

Face blindness? Is it real? His grandmother had lost her sight years ago. For decades she had worked in the toy factory at the edge of town, pouring molten plastic into molds of triceratops heads. Another woman formed the ridged torsos, another the tails, and still another the legs. After the parts cooled and set, a team on the floor assembled the limbs. Long ago his grandmother dreamt of sculpting the plaster models from which the molds were cast—scoring the line of fur into the back of a woolly mammoth or etching the gills of a megalodon. But clouds developed across her eyes, and it was discovered that gases from the hot plastic slowly ate away the cornea—causing blindness. She had signed against her right to sue when she was hired and was left with only a meager severance. She had lived with Jeffrey and his mother ever since, and Jeffrey was glad. His grandmother didn't believe in being sad, and it helped. She whittled little animals from bits of wood, the blade carving out strange creatures from the bright cavern of her memory. Nothing ever looked quite right, but you could close your eyes and feel a dove's wing or a calf's flank, sometimes on the same piece of wood.

Jeffrey knew his mother by her scent. When he was small, he would rest his nose against the skin of her arm. He loved the way she smelled. He told her once that her smell was the most wonderful thing in the world. *An infant can smell their mother from 20 feet away,* she said. His mother knew things like that.

Jeffrey was an only child, but he was hardly a child anymore. He had long ago stopped luxuriating in the scent of his mother's skin. He no longer felt himself an extension of her. There had been moments when he felt so eager to assert his independence that he had wanted to sever the bond. Anger bubbled up in him and he shouted. He said things he

knew he shouldn't. He looked her in the eye and told her it was her fault his father left.

It wasn't her fault. It wasn't anyone's.

Jeffrey had learned at a young age that nothing stayed the same.

In his last memory of his father, they are at Disney World winding through Spaceship Earth. At first, Jeffrey is afraid because the ride is dark, and when the seat tilts back and they begin to move, he squeezes his father's hand. But then the stars emerge, and Jeffrey is entranced as they roll upward past the jerky mechanic movements of cavemen and Michaelangelo and a monk making a book and a computer the size of a room printing out pages and pages of paper, green—he remembered that part as green—and there was a newsboy and a movie theater, and maybe there were astronauts, and maybe there was a war room, at least that's what he thought it was, and something happened at the end, did they take your picture? or project your face on a screen? It would have been his face and his father's face too. And the whole history of humankind was put together so neatly that there was the feeling of progress, of inevitable progress, and hope—you couldn't help but feel hopeful. Even if it wasn't real.

Dr. Sanchez said that the human brain was one of the great mysteries of the universe—an unmapped sea, its depths capable of fathomless surprises. Perhaps, one day, Jeffrey would again recognize his mother's face. He fingered the slender neck of a miniature brontosaurus, each tiny dimple the imagined recreation of an animal millions of years extinct. It was funny: everyone (or most people, anyway) had a memory of a dinosaur, but not a single living person—not *one* person since the dawn of humankind—had ever seen one alive.