

2001

It's Friday night, and like every Friday night, we go to see Joe's parents.

On the drive over, Joe calls: "What do you guys want for dinner?" Usually it's Korean take-out, or occasionally Chinese, though that's too salty. "Chinese people don't know how to make rice," says my father-in-law, no matter how many times I say that restaurant rice isn't authentic. Tonight it's Korean.

We lay the food on the table. I set up Joe's mother's bowl: *duk mandu gook*, dumpling soup, over rice. At this time, she can still feed herself, though she's a bit messy. We don't care that she's messy, but Joe's father fusses over every dropped grain of rice, every dribble of soup.

After dinner, we clear the table and do the dishes. Joe's parents go up to their bedroom. Joe and I go down to the basement living room. Joe's parents don't have cable so there's not much to watch though Joe always manages to find some sports game. After an hour, I get sleepy.

In Joe's old room, I change into my pajamas. There's little of Joe's childhood here. Some yearbooks, a few pictures. Mostly it's his parents' stuff. The room, like most of the house, feels crowded. His parents like to collect things. Jewellery, pocket watches, fountain pens. Vases, china, grandfather

clocks. As the years pass, they collect more and more, and yet their house gets no bigger.

Soon Joe comes upstairs and climbs into bed with me. There are only twin beds in Joe and Billy's old rooms. I try to sleep but I can't. I'm squashed. I rise to go to the other room.

"You can't take one night?" Joe says. He thinks that a husband and wife should always sleep in one bed, no matter how uncomfortable, the way he thinks of many things, that there is only one right way.

"Sorry," I whisper, and steal down the hall. I stretch out on the empty twin. Outside a brook gurgles; somewhere a clock ticks. I sleep.

Joe's father runs an acupuncture clinic on Saturdays. By the time we're awake, Joe's father is already out the door. At Joe's parents', everyone showers and dresses immediately upon waking, even on the weekends. At my parents', we lounge in our pajamas, drinking coffee and chatting, till almost noon.

While Joe picks up breakfast, I help his mother shower. I used to be afraid to be alone with her. I didn't know how to hold her, and was nervous she'd fall, like the day of our meeting with the caterer. But now I know.

First, I take her feet from the bed and turn them to the floor. Next I take her by her left arm and hand, her one good

moving part, and lift her up to sitting. I shift my hand to her armpit, and help her stand. Then we walk.

On good days she can walk practically by herself. One morning, we found her sitting in the kitchen. Joe's father was still asleep. Somehow she managed to make it all the down to the kitchen and pour herself a glass of juice.

“Wow,” I said. It was like teleportation.

Joe wasn't impressed. “Why didn't you wait?” he snapped. “You could have fallen.”

Today is not a good day.

When you walk, you don't realize how you move. You don't know you lift one foot while pushing off with the other, then again with the opposite foot, then again, and again. People with Parkinson's disease get stuck, like cars revving in mud.

Joe's mother is stuck. “C'mon, Mom!” I say. “One, two, *three!*”

She tenses. I know she's trying. “Right foot,” I say instead, like a drill sergeant. “Right foot, left.”

Still nothing. She begins to drool.

“C'mon, Mom.” I nudge at the backs of her ankles with my toes, but she's rooted. Instead of lifting, she pushes, digging deeper into the floor. All of her socks have holes in the same places.

I get in front and take her by both hands, the way Billy does. Joe doesn't like it. “She'll fall like that,” he says, although Billy is a physician and knows these things. But Billy isn't here now.

In front isn't working. I inch her forward, but her lower half doesn't move, which means she'll fall. The last resort. I get behind her, line up our legs, and stick my arms under her hers. Then I walk her like a giant puppet. She doesn't like this, embarrassed by the proximity of our bodies, though by that point I wonder how either of us can feel embarrassed about anything.

In the bathroom I attach her hands to the towel rack while I pull down her sweatpants and underwear. Then I sit her on the toilet. While she goes, I pull off her sweatshirt, undershirt, sweatpants, underwear, and socks. The whole time I keep my eyes averted. Her medicine had taken away her appetite so that she's mostly bones. Her legs are broomsticks, her spine like dinosaur scales. Only her stomach is fleshy, a wrinkled yellow paunch.

When the water's ready, I stand her up and get her in the shower. There's always a moment of panic as she steps over the metal threshold. I'm always afraid her ankle will catch and she'll cut herself, or worse, she'll trip and, slippery and out of my reach, I won't be able to stop her from falling. She doesn't fall. She steps over the threshold, turns herself, and sits on her plastic chair.

At this time she can still wash herself. Later she won't be able to. Later she'll get so bad, she won't be able to feed herself so that one of us will have to cut up her food, put it in her mouth, wait for her to chew, to swallow, give her a sip of water, then start again.

If this is what it's like to have a child, I'll think, then I don't want one.

While she's in the shower, I have ten minutes to myself. Sometimes a bit longer. I will her to take longer. Ten minutes isn't enough time to read; it's just enough to jot down a few words or a sentence that's been floating in my head. All I can do really is turn on the TV.

After the water shuts off, I return to the bathroom. I dry her off and get her dressed. I comb her hair. You can always tell who's taken care of her by the way her hair is combed. The caretakers and I let it fall into its natural part and cowlicks. Joe and her husband part it severely and slick it back. Billy takes the time to blow it dry.

I bring her to the sink. She holds onto the edge while I brace my body against hers. My hands free, I can ready her toothbrush. I hand it to her and she brushes her teeth.

"Take your time," I tell her. The longer she takes, the more time passes. The more time passes, the closer we are to leaving. In the walls of my mind are taped the hours of the day. Twelve, eleven, ten, nine. In my mind I cross out each one. She spits and rinses many times. Parkinson's hindering swallowing so that her mouth is always full of saliva and phlegm. I wait.

I walk her back into the bedroom and onto her bed, easier now that her muscles have warmed. I smooth moisturizer on her face, over and around, like a facial. I put lotion on her hands. I rub Ben Gay into her bad leg. Billy says this is no use. There is no muscle there, only bone, but she says it helps. I

wash my hands for a long time, the Ben Gay tingling the webs of my fingers.

I help her take her medicine. Joe thinks his mother takes too much. “You pop Sinemet like candy,” he says. Sinemet is for stiffness. She does seem to take a lot, but sometimes she takes only half. Then again I don't know what she's taken when I'm not there.

“You and Dad are physicians,” says Joe. “But you don't keep track.”

I bring home a pill box with the days of the week, and the days of the week divided into morning, noon, and night. I show it to Joe.

“Do you think your parents will use this?” I ask. I want his approval. I want him to tell me I did a good job.

He shrugs. “Maybe,” he says. “It's a good pill box.”

But they don't use it. “It looks hard to use,” his mother says. It sits untouched on their dresser for several weeks, till finally it disappears.

I try writing down the times I give her medicine, and the type of medicine I give her. So does one of the caretakers. But no one else does so we're still not sure what she's taking, and we give this up.

Joe and his father are especially afraid she'll take too much Valium. She takes Valium for extreme stiffness, or freezing.

“I'm freezing,” she always says.

“You're not freezing,” Joe always corrects her, the way he corrects me when I say I'm starving. Not starving, he says, just very hungry. “Freezing is very cold. You're just stiff.”

They keep the Valium where she can't reach it – in my father-in-law's study, on a top shelf, in the corner. Usually I give in, figuring five mgs is so little. But sometimes I resist.

“Wait five minutes,” I tell her. “Let me watch this show for ten minutes, and then I'll get your pill.” For the next ten minutes, she moans. Sometimes she cries.

I don't think I'm being cruel.

All of the medications have side effects, especially the Sinemet. It helps with coordination and stiffness but can also cause extra movement. My mother-in-law is always moving, day and night, whether she knows it or not. My father-in-law can go for weeks without a decent night's sleep.

For now though she's not freezing and doesn't need her Valium. I turn on the TV and find a cartoon we both like. It's about a talking squid, and we both find strangely soothing. Next we'll watch a cooking show, the one with the loud woman or the pretty Italian woman, and then maybe *Antiques Roadshow*, her favorite.

“That's like our cake platter!” she'll cry, pointing a wavering hand at the screen. “That's like my ring!” In her mind, her wealth grows.

To keep my hands busy, I darn the holes in her socks, or hem her pants, or fold laundry. Joe isn't back yet, and I hope he won't be back for a while. I hope after he comes back, he goes

out again. "If you feel like going out, go ahead," I'll tell him. Sometimes he buys groceries for his parents, or hits a few golf balls, or goes to an aquarium store. We can manage without him, and when he returns, he's more relaxed. Things are better when Joe's not around.

What Joe fears most is having a stroke like his mother. He fears it or he wants it to happen. Either way he thinks it's inevitable.

Billy has told him he has not just borderline hypertension but full-blown high blood pressure. He doesn't take his medicine. He eats pizza, steaks, and fast food regularly, and doesn't exercise. But for some reason it's me my mother-in-law worries about.

"Don't work too hard," she pleads with me. By then she's mostly confined to her bed. I sit in the chair beside her. "You should rest more often."

"When?" I snap. The truth is I get plenty of rest. I go to sleep at ten every night. I get up at five to go to the gym before work. (I used to go after work till Joe complained about having to wait for me to eat dinner. I told him he could eat without me but he didn't like that.) I try not to eat fatty food, not to stay healthy but to stay thin. I'm the last person Joe's mother should be worrying about.

When Joe is gone, his mother and I drink our coffee and talk. In the beginning we said almost nothing to each other. Then we talked about the wedding. Now we chat freely. She

tells the same stories over and over. When she's clear, she makes sense. But sometimes she tells the stories in circles. She mumbles and I can barely understand what she's saying. She reaches a point, then says the same point again and again, like her foot digging into the floor, until someone gives her a push: "Yes, then what?" She tells how people have wronged her – her siblings, her husband, her mother-in-law. She tells how as a girl she often visited a beautiful garden, and how a strange woman, possibly the same rich woman with the mole, gave her a red coat. She tells how at her medical school graduation the same woman appeared, bearing a white rose. I have no idea if these stories are true.

"You're like my daughter," is something else she likes to say. "You're like me."

We were both born the year of the rat, but I think I'm nothing like her. I want to tell her I don't need her to say I'm like her daughter. I'm already a daughter, I already have a mother. I have a father, a brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and a grandmother. I have many people who'd want to rescue me if I ever got into trouble. I'm already loved.