

few months. Our destination is Kingston, and once there Ruth and I stop in Monkey Joe's, a coffee shop with fantastic cappuccino and great pumpkin muffins. We sit together for twenty minutes, then she goes to work at Benedictine Hospital and I head for the pay phone behind a Hot Wings joint that seems to be always on the verge of reopening and call a cab to the rehabilitation center where my husband has been for nine months.

Sometimes when I arrive Rich is still asleep, his face relaxed, looking so like himself that I can't believe he won't wake up and be all better. Other times he is up, stalled in the middle of whatever he began to do, his back to the door, his arms raised like a conductor, motionless, as if he were playing some cosmic game of statue. Or maybe he sits on the bed, a pair of socks in one hand, his trousers laid out beside him. After our usual greeting, "Absie! How did you find me?" or "What time did you get up? I didn't hear you," he lapses into silence. The nurses say he can stand in front of the bathroom mirror (made of shiny metal) for an hour or more, toothbrush in his hand. In brain-injury jargon, perhaps this is what is meant by "difficulty completing a task."

The first time I heard this term I imagined a child who can't manage tying shoelaces, a grown-up who forgets how to scramble eggs, some kind of visible difficulty, frustration, something that could be relearned. I didn't know about the getting stuck. For my husband, there is no such thing as a minute ago, there is no *but we've been sitting here for an hour and a half*. That information has nowhere to lodge in Rich's consciousness. He has a collapsing past. If he doesn't remember, he doesn't believe. And if everything is now, what's the rush? I used to try and coax him, nudge him on (the TBI term is "redirect"), but that only made him angry and confused. So I have adapted. I join him. We sit and steep ourselves in 10:37, a single moment, while outside this room an hour disappears, bypassing us. I am always surprised when I look at the clock to find how long we've been there.

Once he's moving, I see how slowly he puts himself together. We select the clothes. "These aren't mine," he insists, but somehow we get past that. He puts his socks on the way he always did, rolling them back to get his toes in, unrolling them carefully over the rest of his foot,

## THE MAGNIFICENT FRIGATE BIRD

### Abigail Thomas

Rich was a birder, dyed in the wool, we have lists from his fourth-grade sightings in Central Park. He wrote with a dark pencil and he pressed down hard. Bluejay, house finch, crow . . . Once, in his teens, he sighted a magnificent frigate bird off the coast of Connecticut, blown there by a hurricane. This was the proudest moment of his bird-watching life. On top of his dresser now are a bunch of birds, a small, haphazard collection. There are the shorebirds, long-legged wading creatures; a bufflehead duck he made of clay in the seventh grade; two drab decoys we bought at an auction; a red plastic chicken (mine) that neatly lays three white eggs if you push down gently on her back; a papier-mâché crow, mascot of Old Crow, with his jaunty top hat that I fell in love with because something in its expression reminded me of my father. There is also a little box of grain Rich saved from a cross-country trip he took when he was seventeen; he and a friend worked on farms along the way. It goes with the birds. What used to be on top of his dresser? A small tray for change, his wallet, scraps of paper with things to do, a picture of us taken at his brother's house a couple of weeks after we were married. A flashlight, just in case. A backup alarm clock, just in case. Rich was prepared for everything. He was a man who carried a couple of Band-Aids in his wallet and always had an extra handkerchief if somebody needed one. I've put a corn plant next to the bureau, green and leafy. They never die.

I go up to see my husband every Wednesday. My friend Ruth picks me up at eight, so I get up at six in order to have the dogs walked and the paper read and the coffee drunk. It's a couple of hours north, depending on traffic, and we have become close friends over the last

inch by inch, then pulling them over his heel. Next trousers, then shirt carefully buttoned, and everything tucked in neatly. Rich hasn't shaved in some time, instead he pulls his beard out. This has a name but I forget what it is.

Last week he didn't smile or greet me. He wouldn't hold my hand. "What's wrong?" I asked, this was so unlike him. "We're divorced," he said, as if I were an imbecile. "We're married, Rich," I told him. "We've been married fourteen years. You're my husband," I said, touching his arm. "I'm your wife." He looked at me coldly. "Transient window-like words." He doesn't believe in his brain injury, so he has come up with an explanation for my absence: I have left him. "I'm alone," he says, waving his arm down the hall. "Hundreds of single beds," he says, "hundreds of single beds with old men lying in them with their boots on."

Time has gotten skewed, as tangled as fish line, what means what anymore? How could it be two years since the accident? I calculate it in months, weeks, but the numbers don't feel real or important. One hundred and four weeks. Twenty-four months. Whole handfuls of time have slipped through my fingers. Seasons rush by before I have grasped "winter," "spring." Somehow I have gotten to sixty; in no time Rich will be seventy. We would have had parties to mark the place, but the last birthday slid by unnoticed, the last anniversary. Twenty-four months since the accident. If it were a child, it would be talking, walking, climbing into everything. "Time flaps on its mast," wrote Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*. For us time hangs off its mast. Sometimes I'm not even sure about the mast. Something stopped ticking April 24, 2000. Our years together ended, our future together changed. In one moment of startling clarity he told me, "My future has been dismantled." Last week he wouldn't look at me for an hour. "If I may navigate this already swollen stream of self-absorption," he said at last, "people borrow things without asking."

"What things?" I asked gratefully, and with that the subject had changed. We spent the rest of the afternoon looking at the *Sibley Guide to Birds*, which I'd bought him a year ago. We spent a long time with ducks, with woodpeckers and thrushes. He didn't recall having

ever seen a magnificent frigate bird and I didn't insist. Long-term memory is sometimes intact, but he's forgotten that long-gone windy day in Connecticut.

A friend of mine, a bereavement counselor, tells me that most widows remember more vividly the last weeks of their husband's lives than the span of their lives together. I am not a widow, but my husband as he was is gone. I concentrate on who Rich is at any given moment and I lose sight of who he was, who we were. It takes my friend Denise to recall how when we had company at our house in Greenport, Rich went out early in the morning to buy several newspapers, bags of warm scones and croissants and muffins. I had forgotten, and remembering was painful. Rich used to make a mean omelet. On nights when I was cooked out and there was nothing much to eat, Rich fixed an omelet for himself, did I want one, he always asked, and no thanks, I always said. But the look of it sliding out of the pan, perfect with that mottled brown, smelling of butter, sometimes a little lox thrown in at the last minute, weakened my resolve, and Rich would slide the better part of half onto a plate and urge me to eat. I remember how he used to wake me in Greenport with a cup of cappuccino from Aldo's. One weekend when our friends Sarah and Cornelius and Kathy were visiting we looked up the magnificent frigate bird in the Audubon book and discovered that the male has a red pouch that he inflates to make himself attractive to the female, but it takes him thirty minutes to get it done. "Phoo phoo—be there in a minute, honey—phoo phoo!" We laughed ourselves sick at the kitchen table. How long ago was that? The only way to contain catastrophe is to cordon it off with dates, but the numbers mean nothing. If I think instead of how much dust would have settled on Rich's bureau, then I can feel it. There is nothing like dust.

When Rich is ready, we obtain the pass that lets us out of this locked ward and downstairs to the cafeteria. This week his mood is better, and we look forward to lunch. Rich takes the tray and passes all the baskets of condiments along the right wall. He examines carefully everything in every basket, then drops two onto the tray. Slippery packets of mayonnaise, ketchup, jelly, something unspeakably awful

called "table syrup," tartar sauce, margarine, salad dressing, soon the tray is crowded with these silvery foil-wrapped items. Napkins, two knives, two forks, two spoons. Lots and lots of saltines. I meanwhile am slapping together an egg salad sandwich for him, bowls of salad, a few bananas. We meet at the cash register. "I don't have any money," says Rich anxiously, but I tell him it's on me. (My cheese sandwich after weighing comes to thirty-two cents.) We find a table and unload the food. Last week, the week we were divorced, he looked around and said, "All these people dunking their doughnuts in a cup of sorrow, I hope it's not contaminated by the River Styx." Today we are holding hands again, happy to be together. We eat, go back for more coffee, unwrap the saltines. When the food is gone Rich starts in on the condiments, carefully opening each one, inspecting it, and scooping or squeezing out the contents and eating them on saltines. He is like a curious determined child.

I want to be upstairs at one-thirty, the designated smoking time. In the lunchroom for the Behavioral Unit, cigarettes are rationed out after lunch, and heavy steel ashtrays gotten from the cupboard. The techs hand out the cigs and light the smokes for those who smoke; most everyone does. God knows I do. One of the patients, Mr. Mendez, has a beautiful voice, and having been asked, is now singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in Spanish. He clasps his hands on the table, his feet tapping in time, and before each phrase he draws a solemn breath from his diaphragm without compromising the pace of the anthem. He sings for fifteen minutes without coming to the end, somewhere his needle is stuck, and soon I don't know where or how the song does end. At last he finishes, or rather, stops singing. We applaud and Mr. Mendez is modest but not humble. When the clapping subsides he looks around smiling, "This is America." He bows.

I went to Mexico for a week last winter, a place on the Yucatán Peninsula where time stops, or at least the importance of telling time. You get up at dawn, eat when you're hungry, go to bed when it's dark. The rest of the time you lie in the sun, float in the water. There were pelicans smashing into the water in their ungainly fashion. One

afternoon five impossibly pink flamingos flew by and everyone suddenly got to their feet, shielding their eyes against the sun, like a stadium full of people rising to watch a grand slam. Later I saw two other birds, and I knew what they were right away although I'd never seen one before. By the time I got out my camera they had embedded themselves higher and higher in the blue sky until they were specks. I snapped a picture but you'd never know. They could have been anything up there.