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Cancer Spaceship
by Christian Powell

Cancer. The word hit the desk between him and the doctor with weight. The doctor squinted through his glasses. “Carl? Do you understand?”

“Yes… We meet in two days for the surgery, but it doesn’t look promising. After that, well…” Carl paused, swallowing, “if it works, we’ll move forward. If not… I should prepare myself.”

“It isn’t the end yet, Carl. There’s a lot we can do. The surgery is just… step one. We’ll get as much of the tumor out as we can and then we’ll decide on the next step. Worst case scenario – we can’t get it out, and we make your remaining time as comfortable as possible. How’s that sound?” Carl thought it sounded like something a young, cocky doctor who wasn’t weeks away from dying would say. The doctor offered his hand. Carl was staring out the window and didn’t notice it. The doctor put it away without making a scene. “See you in two days, Mr. Daniels.”

“Mhmm.” Carl said.

Sometimes shit happens that you can’t take back. You can make mistakes in life that will never be set right on this Earth. Carl made mistakes like this with his daughter, Enid. They hardly ever spoke now. He called her when he was diagnosed, though. They met for lunch. She felt strange under his gaze, so intent.

“Hey dad,” she said. “What’s up?”
“Nothin’.” He coughed. Enid was looking at her phone. “I went to the doctor today, about my side.” She looked up. He touched his belly. “Y’know.”

“Mhm.” She read through the menu. After a moment, she met his eyes. “And? Gallstone?”

Carl blinked. He looked down. “Cancer,” he said.

For Carl, the news wasn’t exactly the bombshell it could have been. Carl had known the pain was serious. For years, he had ignored it as it slowly got worse, deeper, heavier inside him. The truth was, he didn’t see much reason to go on fighting. The only reason he forced himself out of bed anymore were the hallucinations. His first surgery weeks ago to remove the tumor had changed his life. Not the surgery itself – it was an absolute failure. Within a moment, they had bumped the tumor and split it. They watched it on t.v. in the operating-room, breaking into little evil fingers who inked their way out into his body, finger-by-finger, grabbed him and squeezed. Not the surgery, though. No, it had been the night of the surgery that changed him.

The surgery was in the early morning. That night, he lay in bed clicking the morphine button attached to his arm, flooding himself warm. He had stared at the ceiling until the television’s twinkling reflection looked like little blinking stars. He tripped on the painkillers that night – imagined he was in a spaceship piloted by his daughter, only she wasn’t 21 anymore, she was 8, like when she first came to live with him. He rode shotgun while she flew the small spaceship up and out of Earth’s gravity. It was all so real, he could feel the walls of the ship, hear its groan as it climbed. There was a moment of weightlessness and Carl floated, beautiful. He unbuckled and swam away from his seat towards the back of the pod and watched her there. Her
little hand reached up and pushed a button. 8 years old, dead-serious in her work – flip switch, check light, look at fuel level. She was all business.

“Snap out of it back there, dad! We got a lot to do here. Run through your checklist.” She turned back to the massive panel of switches in front of her.

Carl looked around the pod. It was no bigger than a treehouse. Two seats in the front, empty space in back. Two windows, one in front of each seat. There was a list on the wall by his seat, stuck to a clipboard that said “DAD” in magic marker across the bottom. Enid reached over, pulled it off the wall, and floated it back to him. The list had all manner of technical terms: things to be checked before flying, things to check before leaving the galaxy, what to do in case of trouble, alien attack, random evils. He looked over the top of the clipboard and saw her staring at him, smiling.

“I miss you, dad… Remember this? We used to play this all the time. Blast off! Right?”

“I remember.” Carl floated and grinned. “It was never this good, though.”

“It was always this good, dad,” little Enid said. That soft, musical voice filled his heart until it poured over. He had missed it so much. When he looked at her here, he didn’t see the grown woman he had driven away. He saw the child, the one who thought he hung the moon in the sky, his brilliant little girl. He saw someone who still loved him, in her eyes a reflection of himself that he didn’t despise. He remembered holding her when she was nine, singing her to sleep, laughing all day. He remembered how quickly everything broke when he started drinking. Alcohol ruins everything, drowns love. He ignored her until her fire for him grew dim. Love has to be fed. Even the brightest flame will fade if no one pays attention.

But in this place, it was new again. Nothing had been ruined.
“Stop daydreaming! I need help,” she said. Carl floated, oblivious to the order. Enid snapped her fingers. “Dad! Check that list and put anything right if it’s off!”

Carl looked up with a start. “Sorry, Captain.” He smiled. He felt good. Hopeful. He looked down at the list again, this time focusing.


The next moment the ship shivered and began to fall back to the ground. Carl was still floating free when the sudden movement of the craft occurred around him. He shut his jaw tight as he felt gravity taking hold and pulling everything down, down to the center. He felt heavy in his stomach. He tried to swim through the air back to his seat, but the ship lurched forward too fast while he seemed to float in place. It fell past him until he hit his head on the cold metal wall of the back of the pod, a clank that made Enid turn around from her seat at the controls.

“Shit!” He said, grabbing his head.

“Dad! *Into* the seat! Get into it! Never turned the rockets on…next time I tell you to check your list you be damn sure and check it!”

“Stop swearing, young lady!” He grabbed the seatbelt and pulled himself down. “And you didn’t say anything about rockets.”

“I did – told ya ’check the list.’ You need to listen to me here. This is my ship. Not yours. You’re always drunk. I fly, you do what I tell you. That’s the deal. Buckle up, this is going to be rough,” Enid winked at him, “but we’ll be fine, done it a thousand times. Comedown’s always the worst.”
He never asked her when she found time to learn to fly. She crashed the ship into the ocean and he woke up in bed with a start. The midnight nurse was lifting him to change his bedpan and spilled his piss all over him.

“Damn honey, why did you jiggle like that?” she said.


Now, the memory of that moment, of that dream, was all Carl could think of. He knew it was insane, but he desperately wanted to go back. It was more real than the years on the couch, more lovely than a 21 year old daughter who resented him with every ounce of her spirit. He wanted it more than he wanted to live, more than he wanted to be forgiven. He was alive there. Every drug-brained fool in the world sees the trip as real and real-life as the space in between. Carl was lost and somewhere inside he knew this. The knot in his side helped him not admit it, though. He was nearing death. He knew he had ruined his life and failed his child, his poor wife long ago turned away and had become a stranger again. But that moment healed him a little, helped his mind. Spending this time with his young daughter in space was making him ok, like starting over. He wasn’t interested in living here anymore – he wanted to be there. In fact, the only reason he went back to the doctor at all was to get more painkillers. He had no intention of making it to the second surgery. He just wanted to be home lying in his bed again. Free, with Enid.

His daughter is an amazing young woman. 21, blond, beautiful. Eyes aching with intelligence. College Honor Roll. An undefeated champion, raised by a single dad, a drunk: a Carl. A bald, chubby, empty box-of-a-man who was taken over year by year, one box of wine at
a time. Each birthday he was less a man and more a routine. The bags under his eyes had grown into a cavity that divided eye from cheek. He was broken. Enid was the flower.

But she hates him.

Now that she’s moved out and never has to deal with any of it, she can admit this. When she was young, she learned to look past his mood swings. They were never violent, just loud. He hated himself and he took it out on anyone he could, his mind twisting words into brutal little tools that drove away even the most kind-hearted people. A stream of women, each less-attractive than the previous, floated in and floated out, leaving random little things all over the house. He took no pride in throwing the trinkets away after they left, Enid developed no real skill by learning to ignore them. His daughter stayed away from the middle, she kept to the sides, never expecting them to stay. She never got beyond polite conversation with them and retreated from her father altogether as his drinking worsened. 7 o’clock, first glass. A year later – first glass at 6. Then 5. Then he was drinking at work. She came to see him when she got accepted into school and he was out cold at his desk, drooling, empty toy-sized bottles of bourbon at his feet. She took his wallet that day and tossed it into the creek by their house and lied to him that night, saying she saw him drop it in the yard. She let him look out there in the dark, drunk as hell, for an hour before she locked the doors and left for a friend’s house. He slept on the grass. She collected her things the next morning and never moved back in.

As the years went on, Carl longed for her. In his mind, she was the only friend he had. She was the only person he shared anything true with. When he was diagnosed two weeks ago, he sat back in his living room and thought about their time together. It is a confusing thing to think that you love someone more than anything on this earth, yet also realize that you treat them like background noise. Carl is a confused man. As he sat there, cancerous, trying not to drink,
trying to pick up the phone and call her, apologize, anything, things began to clear up. He saw small edges of the damage he had done to his life. He felt hollow, his life emptied out over the years into glasses and movies on the couch. He almost killed himself that night, but he had cried, instead. He hadn’t shed any tears for himself in years, but that night, the night he knew he was going to die and how he had spent 18 years in the same house with God himself inside his brilliant child and done nothing but moan and drink, he cried for himself and it was orgasmic. He imagined her young again, and begged Heaven for a chance to make things right. God sighed.

Of course, over the weeks after his initial diagnosis, Enid had cried nearly every night. She loved her dad, empty-shell that he was. She remembered when she first came to live with him, around seven, how they would play all the time – sit with the telescope under stars, hide-and-go-seek at the park, and laugh so hard they spit their drinks out. After his diagnosis, she began to visit again. Her heart broke easy when she stepped into the old house to check up on him. The photos of the smiling family on the wall, of dad before mom left, her beleaguered smile in her high school senior picture, of the two of them together through the years. He was a new man when she first came to live with him: single, kind, a bit fragile. He started to drink when his mother died. She passed on his birthday. A few years after, his best friend passed. Bit by bit, the challenges he was called to face in life were drowned in alcohol. Now, as she pulled up in the driveway to find out how the visit had gone, she prepared herself to lose someone she had already all but erased. Looking into a future without wasn’t hard, it was stepping into the past that hurt. She knocked softly.

“Hey, kiddo,” Carl said as he answered the door.

“How’d it go, dad? Good news?”
Carl cleared his throat. He pictured the cancerous fingers stuck deep, in pieces, in his side. “They told me to keep a positive outlook, said they’re doing th’ best they can.” His eyes were clear. He stared at her face and bit his lip, “I’m sorry, come in come in. I was doing a little… re-decorating.” He held out a bag of glow-in-the-dark stars. “I’ve decided my bedroom is outer space.”

Enid smiled. “I used to have these in my room, remember?”

“Course I do, I put them up there. Hah-ha, you’re mother almost had a heart attack when I fell once, I thought I had broken my collarbone, good Lord, it was ridiculous… that woman was worried about every-little-thing. How is she?”

“She’s good, she sends her wishes. I, uh, I thought I might stay the night, maybe keep an eye out for ya… is that ok?”

“Y’know, I was actually thinking of taking a little trip, maybe clear my head. Can we make it tomorrow?”

Enid stood silent, the most forced smile she ever made came to her face. “Yeah, sure. I’ll come by after I get out of class. Call me if you need me?”

“You bet, kiddo.”

When the door was closed, Carl ran his fingers over the pill bottle in his pocket. He nodded to himself. It was almost dark. It was time. On his way to the bedroom he tossed the remaining stars aside and took out the bottle, dumping three half-red, half-blue capsules into his palm then into his mouth. He sat on the bed. He took a gulp of his drink and the ice in his glass clinked simple musical notes, his whiskey-ice choir. He smiled. He could feel it inside, it was going to happen. Tonight was the galaxy. Spaceship Enid. After about an hour he stretched out, slant-eyed, ready to fly. He lay back on his bed with the lights off, staring at his stars, waiting.
The visions came quick. He flew deep into the solar system with his little girl, his 8 year old angel of God, badass space pirate. They talked, they laughed. The sun itself was tamed by his smile. When he woke up the next morning, he felt closer to her than he ever had. He rolled over and threw up, let it stay on the carpet, grabbed the pills and crawled to the kitchen. He passed out on the floor.

When Enid came that evening, she thought he was dead. He nearly was. The stitches in his side had ripped, he had bled all night – all throughout the galaxy. He had woken up around noon for the second time and tried to stand, spinning room held him to the ground. Strong pills, he thought. She was calm, called 911, followed the EMS to the hospital. His doctor showed up an hour after he was admitted, looking at his x-rays as he entered the room. Carl was confused.

“What am I… why am I here?”

“I came over, dad. You were on the kitchen floor covered in blood. I brought you.”

Carl looked at his side, it looked fine. New stitches, though.

“Mr. Daniels, I’m…” the doctor’s face said enough. “I’m afraid there are not many options left. We’ll have to try and remove whatever else we can now, right now, and then go from there. We’re prepping a room for you, the surgery will start in thirty minutes or so. I’ll meet you in there.” He smiled, carefree, confident, healthy. “See you soon.”

“Mm,” Carl nodded. He looked at Enid. “I wish I could do this over, darlin’. I spent so long ignoring life… I… God-help-me, I would sell my soul to start over.”

“Don’t. We will talk about this when you are out of this place, ok? I’ll be here when you get out. I’m going to call mom, tell her where we are, ok? I’m gonna step outside, be right back, ok?” She left, then walked back in. “I love you.” She nodded to make sure he understood and walked out, dialing.
Carl reached over for his clothes. Grabbing his pants, he shook them to hear if the pills were still there. Little clicks, spaceship clicks, rung out of the pocket. He reached in, took four or five, swallowed them in a hot, dry mouth, and smiled. *It won’t be long now*, he thought. Blast off.

When the nurses came in to take him into the operating room, he didn’t notice at first. He was nearly asleep from the pills. When he felt them moving his arm, messing with the i.v., he asked, groggy, “Who are you? Where’s the kid? She’s flying this…”

Enid started to speak, but the nurse interrupted. “Don’t worry, dear, he’s had a tough day,” the nurse said. “He’s out of it from the morphine we just gave him, anyways. Be calm and we’ll have someone come get you when it’s over. Ok?”

“Yeah.” Enid watched as they wheeled him down the hallway.


Fifteen minutes passed with Enid in the waiting room before a doctor ran in, called for “Ms. Daniels?” and ran her out of the room. “Your father had a reaction to the painkillers we gave him, it looks like an overdose…they’re doing everything they can, but with the cancer, the morphine, his history of alcohol… I’m afraid he might not make it. You need… you need to say goodbye right now. I’m so sorry,” he backed out of her way when opened the door to the room Carl lay in. He was on the bed, his chest slow. Beep, beep, his heart droned on, the machine letting her know. She walked up to the bed and took his hand.


“Dad.”

No response.
“Dad,” she said. His hand went limp, a solid beep from the machine speaking for his heartbeat. “Daddy…”

She stood there with a pitiful smile forced on her face, clenching her jaw, holding back tears. “Blast off.”