Brace For Impact

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Summary: A migraine derails Tom's family time with his sister and nephew, leaving him stranded in the one place he didn't want to be but realised wasn't the worst place to be laid up.

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When the aura hits, it suddenly all falls into place. The irritability for no discerning reason, the weird craving for salt & vinegar crisps, the sluggishness, the trouble focusing on any one thing...

Tom knows he should have clocked it hours ago, but he hasn't had a migraine for over a year. Not a proper one that knocks you sideways, at any rate.

But then the weird silver zig-zag lines flash like fireworks around the edges of his vision, and with it dread of the inevitable spreads through his insides. It's only a matter of time until the pain slams through his head full force.

He briefly considers making some kind of lame excuse to drive home, because the idea of going through it here, in his parents' old house with a 9-year-old on the prowl isn't enticing. But he knows it's not sensible. He could be incapacitated within the next ten minutes to the point where driving becomes a danger not just to himself. And he *really* doesn't want to ride out a massive migraine in his car on the side of the road.

So he squeezes his eyes shut, which of course does nothing at all, and grits his teeth. The three of them just started playing a round of *Smallworld*, which Leo has fallen in love with and keeps insisting they play when Tom comes round on the odd Sunday afternoon – because Tom is a great strategist and Leo loves learning all the tricks from the master.

Tom tries to ignore the light flashes in the periphery of his vision, tries to concentrate and follow what's happening.

"Have you counted your coin score?" Nancy asks her son.

"Oh, uh. One, two, three, four, five, six..."

The game and the voices fade into the background as the silvery flashes increasingly obscure his vision, threatening to take over. He clamps his eyes shut once more, then blinks a few times, vaguely registers that his sister is saying his name.

"Tom. Your turn."

"Okay," he says, trying to focus his attention on the game, failing spectacularly at it because his vision is now 90% sparklers. He presses the heels of both hands into his eye sockets.

"You alright?" Nancy asks.

"Yeah, I just need a minute," he ekes out and clumsily gets up from the chair.

He makes it as far as the hall, has to brace himself against the wooden banister, but his depth perception is shot to hell, and he spectacularly misses the thing, groping at nothing but thin air.

His balance all out of whack, he stumbles ungracefully, knocks his lower arm on the damn thing, and somehow, he isn't even sure how, he finds himself on the floor, his temple awkwardly leaning against the stairs' stringer, and now he wants to stay there for the foreseeable future because the sensation is cool and somehow soothing.

He isn't sure how long he's been sitting there, probably not more than a minute or two, when Nancy's voice comes closer. "Tom?"

Then, more urgent, "Tom? What's going on?"

He lifts an arm to try and tell her it's nothing alarming, that she doesn't need to call 999, but she's already ahead of him. "Do I need to call an ambulance?"

"No," he answers quickly, and that's the precise moment when the aura smears and flickers into nothingness, the pressure builds behind his right eye and the pain sets in. It's sharp and sudden, and he winces.

"Tom, tell me what's happening." Nancy's voice is more urgent now.

"Migraine," he somehow presses out through his lips.

"A *migraine*?" Nancy asks incredulously like it's a completely unfathomable thing for him to be hit with, and her voice is too loud, too grating. He screws his eyes shut against the light from the front porch.

He doesn't say anything because the pain is sharp and stabbing now, right behind his eye socket like someone's taking a serrated knife straight into the back of his eyeball.

"Well, we can't have you ride it out on the floor," she states matter-of-factly, and Tom might have laughed under any other circumstance at her dry pragmatism.

"Come on, let's get you up."

"Too loud," he mumbles, and just then there's Leo's voice, too.

"Is something wrong with Uncle Tom?"

Nancy gives him some brief explanation that's no doubt meant to be reassuring but that Tom doesn't really listen to, because the pain is becoming all-encompassing. He keeps his eyes closed, knowing light will make it worse.

“Okay,” Nancy’s voice is back, but this time it’s low, somewhere near his ear. “I’m going to help you up. You think you can get up the stairs?”

“No,” he says in barely a whisper.

“Front room, then.”

She somehow manhandles him into a semblance of a standing position, and he sucks in a sharp breath when he has to open his eyes to see where he’s going.

She guides him to the front room where he’s deposited on the sofa while Nancy goes and pulls the drapes shut. The thick, dark green material does a pretty good job at plunging the room into near darkness, and Tom is more grateful than he can express.

He slides into as much of a lying position as he can on the old leather thing that isn’t really made for relaxing, and then Nancy is there with pillows that she tries to arrange around him. It’s both a lot more comfortable and incredibly jarring and Tom doesn’t know what to do with it.

In a low voice, she asks, “What do you need?”

“Triptans.”

“What is that? A medication?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think I have any of that. Do you have that on you?”

“No.”

“I have aspirin,” she says somewhat helplessly.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Better than nothing.”

Silence settles when she leaves, and Tom relishes it for as long as it lasts, because before long his sister is back, gently touching his shoulder. It makes him flinch.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “Got the aspirin. How much?”

“Thousand should do it.”

“These are 300 milligrams.”

He wants to snap at her to just figure it the fuck out, but he doesn’t have the energy, so he just makes a noise that hovers somewhere between annoyance and frustration.

“I’ll be right back,” she says in a low voice.

More undefined increments of time pass, then she’s back. “Hold out your hand,” she instructs him, which he does. In the dim light, he can see three tablets and half of one.

“Here,” Nancy says, holding out a glass of water.

He pops the pills into his mouth, already knowing they’ll barely take the edge off, and swallows them down with a gulp of water. The nausea is already knocking on the door. He hopes he can keep these down long enough.

“Okay. What else can I do?” Nancy asks.

He has his arm draped over his eyes now, thinking the pressure might help, though he’s not sure it’s doing all that much. “Nothing. Have to ride it out.”

She doesn’t move for a long moment, which he knows because the room stays quiet. “I want to help,” she finally says a little stupidly.

He draws in an impatient breath. “Nance…”

“Okay, okay. I’ll go. But I’ll check in, okay? I’ll leave the door ajar. Call if you need anything. Water’s here on the table.”

Before she’s out the door, somehow, miraculously, something occurs to him. “Nance?”

“Yes?”

“Bucket. Might be sick.”

“Yeah,” she just says like it’s the most natural thing in the world. She wordlessly puts it on the floor by his side a few minutes later.

And then it’s just him and the dark room that smells of dust, old wood and settled air with a stabbing pain knocking straight into his brain from behind his eye, pulsing and undulating in tandem with his pulse.

It’s a bad one and he can’t remember when he’s last had one that was quite as unforgiving as this. Certainly not for several years, though usually he sees the signs early enough and downs the triptan before it can settle and fester.

He just wants to sleep, or pass out or maybe die, but it’s relentless and the wait for the aspirin to kick in feels like fucking forever – if it actually ever will. It’s entirely possible it’ll do nothing, and Tom doesn’t want to imagine the next few hours he’s about to live through.

The nausea makes itself known now, too. A pressure in his stomach, that horrible feeling under the ribs, his muscles all tense like they’re just bracing for impact. He hopes it may subside if he just thinks of something else, but his body has other plans and does exactly the opposite. Because now all his brain can focus on is the nausea, and then there’s that shudder of cold sweat that runs through his body that tells him he has about two seconds to find the bucket. It’s all he can do to double over to the side and start retching.

Perhaps it’s a blessing that they haven’t had supper yet, because there isn’t much there to expel, but it’s enough to make it harsh and disgusting.

He doesn't hear the door opening and Nancy coming in, but then she's there, her voice all low and concerned. "Christ, Tom," she simply says while his stomach upturns once more and he retches something barely solid into the bucket.

Her hand is on his back, between his shoulder blades, steady and grounding. Her thumb gently runs back and forth there in between the waves that keep hitting, that feel like forever until they start subsiding. He's completely spent by the time that he wrestles his body back into a more upright position.

"Fuck," he mutters.

Nancy is perched on the sofa by his side, her hand gently resting on his thigh. "That it for now?"

He nods, not sure she can see it. "I think so."

"Want some water?"

"Yeah," he says, though not necessarily for drinking. He takes the glass she proffers, rinses out his mouth and spits it into the bucket, then says, "Sorry."

"For what?"

"Puking my guts out."

"Don't be silly. You didn't choose this."

He draws in a breath. Somehow the vomiting always brings a bit of reprieve, at least for a little while. But he knows he's not over it yet. Probably not over the worst of it, even. And of course now he's puked up all the aspirin before they can even do anything.

"There goes the pain relief," he comments dryly.

Nancy stays quiet for a long moment, then says, "I have suppositories. You know, for Leo."

He's still weighing the option in his mind when she asks, "Do you want one?"

He can't fathom the idea. "No thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

Nancy waits another beat, then gets up and leaves the room but not before she's taken the puke bucket to clean it out.

When she comes back, the pain behind his right eye socket is already intensifying again. With his eyes closed, he hears her place the bucket back where it was, then she says, "Found some websites that say caffeine can help, so there's a bottle of Coke if you can stomach that right now."

It's not a bad idea, he has to admit. "Yeah, thanks."

"You'll probably be more comfortable in bed, don't you think?"

Yeah, he will be, except the curtains there do fuck-all for keeping out the light. "Too bright."

"Oh. Right." Nancy gets up and grabs the well-worn woollen blanket over on the footstool to the side. She unfolds it and drapes it across Tom's legs.

He vaguely registers the notion that it's very much not like her to fuss over him, but perhaps motherhood has made her go softer around the edges, or perhaps their last few years in closer proximity have rekindled their connection – or both. He isn't going to argue with it.

Then he's left alone in the front room again – just him and the silence of the old house. Nancy has probably asked Leo to do something quiet for the rest of the afternoon, which he's thankful for.

He fumbles on the table for the aspirin, downs two of them with some Coke, then surrenders to his fate because the next few hours are going to be hellish.

And they are. The pain dials back up to full force within the next ten minutes and he ends up lying curled up on the sofa, trying to ride it out. It undulates between barely tolerable and him wanting to gouge his eyes out. When it gets really bad, he can barely contain the moan that wants to work its way out of him. And maybe a few times he doesn't.

Even though he sent her away, when the stabbing pain blinds all his senses, he wishes he hadn't because somehow Nancy's no-nonsense manner can be reassuring and comforting. She said she'd check in, but when he most wishes she did, there's just the oppressive silence of the old house all around him.

The next time the nausea starts betraying him – he can't quite tell how many minutes or maybe hours later it is – it's mostly just dry heaving. His stomach has nothing left to give except acid, so it's loud and piercing as he retches into the bucket.

It summons his sister again, who is there like a beacon through stormy seas, a hand rubbing gentle circles on his back. When he's done with this round, heavy and exhausted, sinking back against the pillows, she reaches over to the table and there's a noise of lightly splashing water.

The next thing he knows, he feels something cool and wet against his forehead, and his throat can't help emitting something that's halfway between a sigh and a whimper. Almost instinctively, he leans into the cool and damp sensation of the flannel.

"This good?" she asks.

He swallows. "Yes."

"Has it got any better yet?"

Has it? He's not sure he can really tell, but maybe the pain is just a fraction less, perhaps also helped by the medication. "Maybe," he tries tentatively. "Not much."

Nancy takes the cloth away and wets it again, then wrings it out. When she puts it on his forehead, his hand comes up to adjust it so that it covers the place where the worst of it sits.

"Thanks," he mumbles.

"It's the least I can do. Did you try the Coke?"

"A little."

"Alright." She doesn't say anything else, just quietly sits with him. When the flannel has gone warm and she takes it away, she asks, "Want me to go?"

God no, he wants to say, because this feels good. Or maybe not good, but it's the best that she could have done. Something that's actually taking the edge off. He opts for a plain, "No."

"Okay," she just says, and then the cool flannel is back in the place where he'd previously indicated, and he closes his eyes with a breathy sigh.

Her thumb gently brushes his hairline, the faintest of comforting gestures, and then something in his chest constricts. He can feel tears prickling behind his closed eyelids. Tears he isn't sure where they're coming from, because the two of them don't usually do tears, but now he's stripped bare, all defences torn down, and it's just raw core left.

And Nancy notices it, of course she does. She makes a small noise that resembles an *aw* and her thumb comes away. There's concern in her whisper when she asks, "Too much?"

"No," he says stupidly. "Nance..."

It sounds kinda desperate, even to him, and although they haven't seen much of each other in the past few decades, she knows him well enough to read it. She keeps gently brushing her thumb along his temple, and the tears keep coming, quiet and unbidden.

They do this for a while, neither of them speaking, and it helps. At some point he must have actually drifted off, because the next thing he registers is waking up on the sofa, the blanket now pulled all the way up to his shoulders. The room is bathed in total darkness now, which tells him it must be past nightfall. How long was he out?

He takes stock and with much relief realises that the pain in his head has gone from debilitating to dull and annoying. He tests the waters and pulls himself into a sitting position, relieved that his head isn't exploding in the process. The pain still throbs but it's nowhere near as bad as it was before.

Clumsily, he gropes around in the dark, finds his mobile on the table and fumbles with it until the display lights up. It tells him it's 10:48 pm. It also tells him that, thankfully, his brain isn't going into panic mode at the slightest amount of light anymore.

He shines the display at the table. The half-filled glass of Coke is still there, no doubt gone warm and stale by now. There's a package of aspirin with the half pill Nancy had cut up earlier lying on top of it. The bowl with water stands in the middle of the table, the flannel floating in it. There's also a note that he can barely read in the dim light.

> *Hope you're feeling better when you read this.*
> *I've made the bed for you so don't you dare bugger off.*
> *Wake me if you need anything. I mean it.*

His mouth curves into a smile because he can hear it all in her voice. He might have entertained the notion of leaving but throws that to the wind. He can stay here for a night. It'll be nicer than driving back out to Haslingden with oncoming headlights flashing in his eyes.

Gingerly, he manoeuvres his body into a sitting position at the edge of the sofa. So far, so good. He presses two of the aspirin out of the blister and downs those and the half pill with the rest of the Coke. Better safe than sorry, he figures. His brain might decide to betray him later and do the same thing on the left side, and he'd rather not take the chances.

In the hall, he listens for any sign of activity, but the house is quiet. Leo is no doubt asleep. He tries to go up the stairs quietly, but there's at least three steps that creak, no matter where you step.

As announced, he finds the bed in his old room made, a towel and a pair of checkered pyjama bottoms sitting at the foot of it. There's also a toothbrush still in packaging there. Nancy was always the pragmatist. There were times when he hated that quality of hers, but not so much tonight. Tonight, it's a blessing.

He gets ready for bed and he's about to peel back the duvet when he hears a noise from the door. Nancy is standing there in her purple, pale pink and white checkered pyjamas, a slight look of worry on her face.

"Feeling better?"

He nods. "Yeah. Still not a 100%, but getting there."

"Okay. Heard you roaming around. Just wanted to check in."

"Thanks."

She hovers in the door. "Glad you're staying."

"Well, I was threatened into it."

"Good. So you found the note..."

"Yeah. The toothbrush was a nice touch." He gestures at the pyjama bottoms he's now wearing. "Are these dad's?"

"No, they're yours. They were in the wash when you moved out, and you never asked to have them back."

"You haven't been wearing them, have you?"

She chuckles. "Ew. No. Besides, my sizeable bum would never fit in those."

He wisely decides not to comment and instead bends down to pull the duvet aside and get into bed, but Nancy is still there, not moving, so he straightens back up because this feels like there's more of a conversation to be had.

In the hazy light from the lone lamp on the nightstand, her face isn't plain to read but her brow indicates a clear state of concern, so he tells her, "Nance. I'm okay. Really. Just need a good night's sleep."

She nods slowly. "Have be honest, that was a little scary."

He considers this, thinks of all the years she's been the sole caretaker to their father, where dealing with all sorts of health and behavioural crises was par for the course, where trying to anticipate someone's needs became a honed skill and setting aside your own wants and desires became instinct.

The way she's now standing there, small and more vulnerable than he's seen her before is a stark contrast to her usual assertive presence and her readiness to face whatever had to be faced.

Before he knows it, his feet start moving so that he stands opposite her. He gently touches her upper arms. "Hey. I'm okay."

Her brow furrows briefly, and he pulls her towards him, lets his arms come around her back. She leans her cheek against his collarbone, her arms around his waist and they just stand there for a few, long moments.

"Thank you," he mumbles into her ear.

She pulls back and looks at him. "For what?"

He gestures at the bed. "This. Everything."

"Least I could do."

"No. Don't downplay it. You being there, it made it a lot easier." He knows that's a massive understatement, but he also knows she doesn't love grand gestures.

Her mouth curves into a small smile, but then she sobers. "Leo kept asking what was wrong with you. I tried to explain it to him, but I'm not sure a nine-year-old's brain quite fathoms the concept of a migraine like that."

He nods. "He asleep now?"

"Yeah. Took him a long time to fall asleep. Eventually did around ten." She gives him a tentative grin. "He's gonna be very crotchety tomorrow."

"Good. Then we can both be."

She steps back to widen the space between them. "Two grumpy boys to manoeuvre through breakfast. Can't wait. Speaking of... You think you'll need the bucket again?"

"Why, were you planning on spring cleaning through the night?"

She gives his upper arm a playful jab. "Shut up."

"Ouch." He feigns the hurt, although he doesn't even need to fake it very much since his head is still tender and achy. "Think I'm done with that."

"Good. I mean, I can bring it up, just in case."

"Nancy. Stop with the fussing. Looks really odd on you."

"Shut up," she says again. "I know you liked it, and I'm not sure I'll let you live it down."

He groans, puts the sarcasm in his voice. "Yeah, great. Thanks. Remind me to never let this happen again."

She goes quiet, looks to the floor, then back up at him. "Would you have called someone if you'd been at home on your own?"

He frowns. That's an odd question. "I don't know. Probably not. I mean, what's the point?"

"Tom...," she says a little abashedly. "I know you're not used to it, but the point is that you don't have to go through everything alone. You have people now you can ask for bloody help when you need it."

His mouth twitches with sudden emotion. Motherhood has *definitely* softened her. Or maybe he's missed too much of her life to take notice. And now, with a nephew in the mix whom he loves and who seems to love him, his sister in close proximity he still has to learn to lean on, a lot has changed.

He looks at Nancy. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I mean it," she says with conviction. "If something like this happens again, if you're ill or, I don't know, you need anything, you call me, okay?"

He nods. "Okay. Can I go to sleep now? I'm bloody knackered."

She meets his eyes. "Yeah, of course. Sorry."

And because he can't help it, he steps into her space and gives her another hug.

She gently pushes him away after a few seconds. "Okay, this repeated body contact is actually worrying. Go to bed. Maybe you should ring in sick tomorrow."

“Yeah. We’ll see how it goes.”

She turns to go but stops briefly in the door. “Night, Tom.”

“Night,” he tells her.

He crawls into bed, waits for the warmth of the duvet to envelop him. The dull pounding in his head has settled just enough to be almost bearable, so he closes his eyes and slows his breathing.

Tomorrow’s going to be another day, and even though the migraine hangover is never fun, the prospect of waking up to a sister making him breakfast on a stomach that’s still a little sensitive isn’t the worst he can think of. Certainly better than waking up in his flat on his own, trying to gather the energy to drag his sorry arse into work and stop for a double shot latte on the way that he’ll later regret having.

He hangs on to that as he drifts off to sleep with the faint, regular sound of raindrops pattering against the slanted roof above him.