

A Shaky Bridge

By Marrisa Lingen (2870 Words)

Afterward, no one in Casey's family could say when their feelings about the neural bridge implant started to sour. None of them—Casey least of all—wanted to see the signs at first. Humans are extremely good at not seeing things they don't want to see, and the neural bridge had been the next thing to miraculous after her father's stroke, restoring his speech without even a week of therapy or a hint of a slur, letting him walk again steadily, without a cane. But gradually she couldn't help but notice that her mother was pale, had more lines around her mouth, and was less likely to speak but more likely to snap or cry than previously, and finally she took her aside to ask what was the matter.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Don't give me that, Mom, it's obvious something's bothering you."

"I don't want to worry you with it."

Casey put a hand on her hip. "Do I look unworried now?"

"It's just . . . some of the things your father says. They aren't like him. I know they said the neural bridge was supposed to handle everything from the stroke, but . . . it's not your dad, Case."

Her hand dropped. She tried to keep her voice light, positive. "They also said there could be personality changes after a stroke. Even with the neural bridge."

"He recites the ads for MindBridge Corp's other products verbatim," said her mother flatly.

Casey felt her mouth drop open. She made herself close it.

"It's not that he's losing his temper more than before, or crying, or any of the stuff I read about happening after a stroke. It's just . . . MindBridge Corp ads, and sometimes other ideas about MindBridge Corp and Spencer Rawling."

Casey wished she didn't recognize the name of the CEO of MindBridge Corp. She certainly had no idea who was the CEO of the company who made her shoes or her glasses. But Spencer Rawling had made himself unavoidable in the public sphere in the last few years, always finding some way to put himself front and center of every new product launch or even mild update. She felt petty for hating his face. Also, she still hated his face anyway.

"Dad hates Spencer Rawling," she said now.

"I know he does," said her mother, "but sometimes he doesn't talk like it."

Casey resolved to pay more attention, but it didn't take long to come up with her own list of things her father said that sounded really unlike him. Now that she knew what to look for—his voice was the same, but his phrasing was different, very different. She asked her younger brother Norris to help her address it with them, even though she knew he hated talking about health stuff, or emotions, or anything personal.

"I think we have to take this seriously, for Dad's sake and for Mom's," she said.

Norris squirmed. "Maybe he just feels genuinely glad to have it. Grateful. I mean, I'm glad he has it. So maybe he's feeling differently about The Spence."

"I have been," said Casey. "You know I have. But this goes beyond that. I think we have to talk to Dad about it."

"Oh joy," Norris muttered. She gave him her patented big sister look, and he fell reluctantly into line, trudging into the living room where they had always had family conversations.

"Dad, you've been saying some stuff lately that worries us," Casey started, when her mom and Norris showed no sign of starting.

"What kind of stuff, gooferoo?" he asked.

She smiled despite herself. Thirty years old, and she was still gooferoo and Caserino to her dad. But she couldn't be distracted, this was too important. "Stuff about MindBridge Corp, Dad. About Spencer Rawling."

"Like what?"

"Yesterday you said that Spencer Rawling was the best thing that ever happened to humanity and deserved a medal," her mother said.

"You never used to say that about someone with his track record of labor abuses and human rights violations."

"No, he's always—I think—did I really say that?"

"You really did, and it wasn't the first thing that made me worry about you."

He looked bewildered. "I—I suppose I must have. I can't think what it was that made me say it, let me see . . ."

His explanation was garbled enough that it did more harm than good if the goal had been to reassure them. Each sentence sounded like him, but they didn't lead to where he was trying to go—and he didn't seem to notice. Later, their mother pulled Casey and Norris aside. "I looked into this," she said. "I've read a bunch of articles about involuntary speech. We—people, humans, I mean, all of us—we're really bad at leaving things we said or did with no explanation. So

we backfill an explanation for why it was totally what we meant to say or do—even for stuff like triggering a reflex point that is literally not within our control.”

Casey thought about this. “Is it kind of like how when you have something in your eye and it’s watering, you feel sad?”

“I think so. We want the world to make sense. We especially want ourselves to make sense.”

Norris had been listening grimly. He muttered, “Even when we don’t. But what if this means that Dad starts to believe the stuff he’s saying? Not just when the thing is controlling him, but . . .”

“But because he’s filled in the rationalizations,” said Casey, staring at her hands. “Yeah. That’s . . .”

“Awful,” their mother supplied. “Unbearable. Inhuman.”

“Also possible,” said Norris.

“Yeah.” Casey knew even before looking up that her mom and Norris would have identical expressions on their faces. “We’ve got to find some way to stop this thing.”

Like a good modern person, the first thing she did was look on the Internet. The forums for the neural bridge were run by MindBridge Corp, and Casey suspected MindBridge employees regularly deleted any negative feedback. She had her suspicions confirmed when she went to click on a post titled, “Unwanted speech with neural bridge?” and got a “post not found” notice.

What she did find was extremely enthusiastic marketing copy about how MindBridge Corp would never switch to a subscription model.

Since she had not considered that they might have demanded that people subscribe to the use of their own brains, the assurance that they would not was the opposite of helpful—especially when ad content seemed to be the other option they had considered.

The wider Internet was a little more helpful, but only a little. Complaint was easier to find than action—and there was a concerted backlash to the comments that might have been orchestrated by MindBridge Corp

but was not obviously their doing. Casey noticed that every time she found someone worried about their loved one’s uncharacteristic speech, a normal-looking profile—“Hugh Mann,” she joked to Norris bitterly—would show up to accuse them of censoring their friends and family members, of not being willing to hear their true thoughts.

“Classic, absolutely classic,” wrote one commenter. “You blame MindBridge Corp for the things you don’t like about your own wife instead of dealing with it. Get marriage counseling—and leave Spencer Rawling out of the problems in your relationship.”

Meanwhile, her father was getting more and more frustrated with the MindBridge-facilitated speech. His main reaction was to go silent as

much as possible, which meant none of them were seeing how he was processing it—and so they couldn't help. Casey spent more and more of her time trying to figure out how to get through to him, without much success. She made the mistake of mentioning her frustration to the other members of her volunteer group when they were on a break from sorting donations for the food shelf.

"Ugh, those implants just seem horrible," said Sasha, a fastidious woman she'd volunteered with for years.

"That's . . . what I'm saying, they're a big problem for my dad. We're not sure what to do about it."

Sasha shook her head. "He should never have gotten one of those."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Anyone could see they were going to be a problem," said Sasha.

"Who puts something like that in their brain?"

"Someone with no choice?" said Casey.

But Sasha didn't catch the warning tone in her voice. "There's always a choice. I'm just glad I didn't get one of those things. I saw right away that they were trouble."

"He had a fucking stroke, dipshit!" Casey bellowed. She knew everyone was staring, but she couldn't take it anymore. "What exactly do you think he should have done? What do you think we should have done for him? Said, 'Oh well, bye, Dad, you've had a good run, but what if the person who runs the implant company turns out to be one of the world's worst assholes'? Is that what you'd have done for your fucking father? I hope so, if he's anything like you!"

She was panting, her blood pounding in her ears. The room was utterly quiet. She snatched up her bag and stormed out.

"Casey! Casey, wait!"

She whirled around. It wasn't, as she feared, Sasha behind her. It was Meg, another volunteer from their long-standing group.

"I'm really sorry about all that."

Casey took a deep breath, then another. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't you, you didn't—" She waved her hands. "It just . . . was a lot already. And then to have her blame him, I couldn't . . ."

"Sasha's just scared."

They let that sit between them for a minute, and then Casey shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't care. I honestly don't. We're all scared all the time. That's the time we're living in. It's not an excuse for turning up our noses at other people's troubles."

"Not an excuse, no. I didn't mean that. She's trying to tell herself something like this can't happen to her because she knows it could, but it's still not okay to push it off on people who are suffering."

Casey took another deep breath, less shaky this time. "What do

you—I’m sorry, I don’t mean this in a rude way, but what do you want? Why did you follow me?”

“I wanted you to know that I understand. I mean, not personally, but—my neighbor. My neighbor had a neural bridge, and she had it taken out, and she. Uh. She died. So I think I know some people you need to meet.”

The activist group had a locked chat that required an invitation to join. After seeing the comments on the public Internet and dealing with Sasha’s judgment, Casey could see why, even though it had kept her from finding them. The main discussion seemed to be about forming a class action lawsuit that would come with a settlement.

“I like money as well as the next person,” Casey wrote, “but what would that do?”

“It might shut down MindBridge Corp!” another user wrote back. “They need to pay.”

Casey ran a few quick searches on the back scroll. “I really appreciate that you’ve got lawyers looped in on this. I think we should be realistic about what we might get, and the lawyers have been transparent with us about that. And . . . for a company the size of MindBridge Corp? The amount we’re talking about here—the TOP amount—isn’t even one percent of their annual budget.”

“A fine is just a fee,” someone else chimed in. “For the super-rich, it just lets them know what it costs to fuck us.”

At least she wasn’t the only one who saw it. But it was frustrating to have the other people who cared about this topic fixed on punishment when that wouldn’t help her dad one bit. She asked the message boards about possible solutions—removal of the implant, rerouting with therapy, how her father might heal in those cases. Everyone she talked

to knew about Meg’s neighbor—and their knowledge seemed to stop there. She alternated between reading the message boards obsessively and trying to live in the moment with her family while she still could.

The first step came when they were hanging out for Norris’ thirty-first birthday—and it didn’t start well. They hadn’t even gotten through the cake when their dad, who had just been joking about the Rockies’ upcoming season, replied, “MindBridge Corp has a wide range of products for your neuropsychological assistance needs.”

“Dad, you’re doing it again,” said Norris.

“Don’t endure your brain trauma unassisted—ask your doctor about a neural bridge!” They waited, but that appeared to be the extent of this one. His face twisted in anguish. “It feels so normal when it’s happening, and then . . .”

Their mother put her hand on his. Casey glanced away, letting him compose himself, wanting to fling herself into a group hug instead. She

took a bite of cake. It sat like wet paper in her mouth; she was completely unable to enjoy the apples and spices.

“They ought to throw Spencer Rawling in jail,” Norris muttered, attacking his own piece of cake like it was responsible.

“Or recall the devices,” said their mother. “All of them.”

“I mean, sure, yes, we might as well dream big,” said Casey. “But the first thing I want is something that helps Dad. Actual Dad, right now.”

He smiled painfully. “Thank you, sweetheart. I actually . . . just got a notification about that. I wanted to wait to hear how recovery went, but . . . another person from our stroke survivors’ group got her implant removed, and she survived the procedure at least.”

“Survived, but in what condition?” their mother asked worriedly.

“That’s what we’re waiting to find out.”

“I didn’t know you were in a stroke survivors’ group, Dad,” said Casey.

He shrugged, looking away. “You have your groups, I have mine. I need to know what they’re doing out there. I need to know how bad it’s gotten for others. Even if I don’t entirely want to know.”

The birthday party never regained its intended cheer, but Casey realized with some chagrin that they’d been trying to do things to her father rather than with him. She still didn’t think the people who accused the families of shutting down real opinions were at all correct—full of shit, in fact—but being better than Internet propaganda painted her to be didn’t feel like the best she could do.

None of them wanted to read too much into the successful removal—but there was another, and another. What there still was of news media began to pick up the stories—with ample quotes from the corporation, protesting its innocence, but still. A judge approved damages for a neural bridge patient who had lost his job because he kept pitching MindBridge Corp to customers when he was supposed to be selling them shoes. Casey had never been sure of a single moment of the tide turning, and she didn’t want to rely on this one—but it did seem that they were another inch away from drowning.

And then her father came to the family, calm, resolute. His old self, or almost. “I’ve followed six different removal cases now,” he said. “One of them died. I don’t want to lie to you, that’s still a possibility. The other five have had—” He hesitated. “More PT and OT than if they’d never had the implant. But they’re getting there. They’re making their own posts on the forums again instead of having their families post for them. It would mean a lot of work for you all, I know that, it’s a lot to ask.”

“A lot of work?” said Norris. “Are you—”

“Your father wants to get the implant removed,” said their mother.

He nodded. “I do. There are risks, and the best-case scenarios are, as I said, a lot. I would need support from all of you to make it

work at all.”

Casey and Norris looked at each other. Norris nodded for his older sister to go ahead.

“It’s up to you, Dad,” she said. “If you feel like this is the best thing for you, if you want us to just . . . ignore the ads, try to mentally skip over them like we would on a video or something, we can do that. This is your literal brain we’re talking about here.”

“The best brain you can have—with MindBridge Corp!” he said. They all waited. He sighed. “Yeah, no, I can’t do this anymore. Even if the rest of you are patient about it, I see two options if I keep the thing—either I stay aware that it isn’t me, and I have to fight it all the time, or I don’t stay aware, and I just become a puppet. I don’t like either of those. So I guess we’re yanking it out.”

Norris cleared his throat. “If there are side effects, Dad . . . I’ll take you to physical therapy.”

“Me too,” said Casey hastily.

“Speech therapy, whatever you need. I’m there,” said Norris.

“They’re not sure if I’ll get back to full function,” said their dad. “But what I get will be me, all me.”

“Sometimes ridiculous, but always ours,” said their mom, kissing him on the cheek. She still looked haggard and underslept, but for the first time in months, hopeful.