



STORIES IN WHICH THE MAIN CHARACTER(S) SPEND MOST (EVEN BETTER, ALL) OF THE STORY'S TIME IN CONSTANT MOTION. (JUST BEING ON THE EARTH, WHICH IS SPINNING AND MOVING AROUND THE SUN, DOESN'T COUNT.)

Table of Contents

Half Fin.....	3
by C. R. Hodges	
Fireworks Over Disney	11
by Kay McSpadden	
Paper Cut.....	27
by Mary Pastorello	
Frankie Cycles On.....	36
by Ren Wednesday	
Things That Move	49
by Twinkle M	
Move Eat Repeat.....	61
by Ian Salavon	
Cockfosters.....	66
by Sarah Moraghan	
Summer	84
by C. J. Peterson	

FIRST PLACE

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Half Fin

by C. R. Hodges

Tap. A single raindrop falling on a tranquil ocean. A few heartbeats later a second, then a third. Too numb to listen, I fade back into the swimming half sleep. Lost, starving and exhausted, I just want to make my way home.

More taps, persistent, yet without the randomness of rainfall. My eyes flutter open. I swivel my head, imaging the distant pings through my jawbone. A sonic mirage, I tell myself, as my eyes droop again. I have been swimming for two moon cycles now, through the vast deep water devoid of food. More a skeleton with fins than the dolphin I once was, I continue toward the sunrise.

The swelling amplitude and eerie familiarity of the pinging eventually cut through my stupor. Both sides of my brain awaken, listening, counting the voices. Four, maybe five creatures—no, they are *ships*—approach.

Friends. An ocean ago, the human Mel-Nie trained me to recognize foes from allies by their voices, their sounds. Despite the weariness of my emaciated body and the ache in my stomach, I seek out the largest ship. If I can make it onto her bow wave, I can finally rest. The throbbing grows nearer, but she sounds wrong somehow, sick.

The water suddenly frigid, my stub of a right fin trembles. The ship is large, yet still smaller than Ger-Ald or the other ten-whale ships. I force my tail flukes into action, focusing on the approach. Images of fin-like triangles come unbidden. Chi-La, my mate, was always better at this, plotting the sea path of these great ships, holding me back until just the right moment. I surge forward, trying to build speed, but my balance is off and my strength is but a shadow. The massive bow wave is there and then gone, just the sharp keel bearing down on me, like the one that sheared off half my fin. I dive, corkscrewing. My stub flails uselessly. A tail fluke glances off the hull, spinning me so I face the churning maelstrom.

I kick at the hard steel plates, pain coursing up my spine. Memories flood back: the grating sounds of ships dying, the searing heat from the burning sea. Chi-La died this way, hacked into chum as she tried to save Ger-Ald while I rescued Mel-Nie. I can still smell Chi-La's blood in the water, still see the thousand ragged pieces of her pulverized body floating past. I plunge for the deep, using my good fin to spiral away from the hull. The giant whirling blades, *propellers* Mel-Nie named them, pass less than a length above my tail.

Only one propeller, I realize, the reason for the odd cadence. This ship is crippled, like me.

Surfacing in the calm between the wakes, I gulp air, musky and tinged with oil. The bright sunlight burns through the fog of Chi-La's lingering memory. I curse at an albatross as it soars past, as if it can understand, even as I swim on.

Furious with my ineptitude, I sprint after the trailing ship. My stub has to work so much harder now, even though this ship is slower. And smaller, but she will have to do. I take a true course in, dead on. The bow wave assaults me, water forcing at my blowhole. The dark prow looms over me, crashing downward. I struggle to flip myself around. My flukes grate across the barnacle-covered hull. I lunge forward, my whole body driving my exhausted flukes and fins.

Then I am on the crest of the bow wave. Safe. The ship does the work now, and I rest, still moving, still heading toward the morning sun.

I persist for a full sun cycle, my exhausted body rejuvenating, my mind relaxing. We were once the best, Chi-La and I, the only dolphins who could ride the furious bow waves of the huge ten-whale ships. Now I ride the bow waves of their puny escorts, alone. But at least I ride. The color of the sea softens, green instead of blue-black. Green means food. I leap into the air, plunge to my right and break free. My reward is a single ping of raw sound, the humans' form of greeting. I chirp an unheard reply, for the first time in many sun cycles wishing I still possessed the talker that Mel-Nie strapped to my chest. But that died too, in the burning sea.

The shallows serve up a banquet, and I gorge myself on mackerel. Three sun cycles later I swim lazily with the current, sated. Home can wait just a little longer.

A harbor looms before me, too cold, and without the proud arch bridging the headlands. Yet I have been here before, trained here with Mel-Nie and her human pod, and I know my heading. My half fin seaward, I make for home.

*

I meet several pods of dolphins along the way, but none are familiar. One pod is friendly, with surplus females, but I am not yet interested in a new mate. The currents help, the water warming, my strength returning as I eat and eat. There are many ships headed up and down the coast, ugly things that taste of grease and dead fish, but some have modest bow waves that do make for a decent ride. For the first time since Chi-La's death I enjoy myself, until a pair of dolphins join me on the wave.

The petite female greets me with a cheerful squeak; the larger male muscles his way in between us. "Taken," he says. He is a quarter length longer than I, his flanks smooth and unscarred.

"My mate died," I say, in a neutral chirp that neither threatens nor accepts his dominance. "I am going home." Yet I do not yield my place on the crest of the bow wave. Our place. Chi-La should be with me. I resist the urge to flee, to dive, to never surface.

He responds by shoving me to my left, his large flank slamming into my broken fin. I feel myself slipping toward the edge of the wave, the depths beckoning. But I

snap my flukes hard, spin and butt him under the jaw, then rake the jagged edge of my half fin up his tender underbelly. He jerks aside, a few drops of blood tainting the water for a heartbeat before the wave flushes the taste away. "Was it a shark?" he asks, as he images my ravaged fin, his chirps higher pitched now. "Half-Fin," he adds.

Despite the more deferential tone, the epithet both offends and pains me. Yet it fits. I accept the new name as penance. "Human ship. A death fight."

"Who won?" the female asks.

"No one."

We ride the bow wave in silence. "Where is the rest of your pod, Half-Fin?" she asks.

I want to explain that my pod consists of dolphins and humans and even ships. I need to talk about the carnage that night: the unimaginable fires that burn the surface of the very ocean, the gurgle of human lungs flooding with seawater as they drown, the groans of rupturing steel hulls. But I can't even tell myself that they may all be dead, even Mel-Nie. "Gone," I say, "like my fin."

The male slides off to his right, allowing me the prime location on the crest.

I stay with them for the rest of the swim down the coast. Hoon-Epp gives me a wide berth but Tae-May, his young mate, swims beside me, asking countless questions. "What is the sea like on the far side of the world? How did you get there? What was your mate's name? Was she sleek?"

I answer her questions about the sea and even Hoon-Epp's questions about the battle, but it is painful to talk of my mate. "Chi-La was smart. She taught me how to ride the bow waves of the ten-whale ships."

"No one can ride the bow wave of a mighty ten-whale," Tae-May says.

"We did." Chi-La knew the way to enter the wave, just right. She knew how to calculate *angles* and *velocity*, concepts I have never understood despite Mel-Nie's best efforts at teaching. "Together."

This shuts her up. Hoon-Epp too, who offers Tae-May to me that night while we drift past a beach. I decline. Chi-La was sleek once too, but that was before. Her scars were far sexier than any smooth-flanked dolphin.

“Were you frightened when the great air sharks took wing?” Hoon-Epp asks, swimming in my wake as the sun burns through the morning haze.

The air sharks that launch from the decks of the ten-whale ships, flames spitting from their tails, were indeed terrifying that first time, but not now. In truth we even flew once, Chi-La and Mel-Nie and I, in an air shark’s gullet, over the immeasurable ocean. But these are secrets of the humans, Mel-Nie’s secrets. Secrets I will not tell.

“Can you teach us, Half-Fin?” Tae-May asks, as she brushes softly against my underside. “To ride the bow waves of the great ten-whale ships?”

She is sleek, and I can almost taste her in the water. But I can almost taste Chi-La’s blood too, the image of her being torn to pieces still seared into my jawbone.

“When I get home, perhaps. If I find my friends. My pod.”

“You could start a new pod.” She rolls under me, her underbelly smooth.

I plunge ahead, my flukes beating faster now, forcing myself to remember Chi-La, to remember the scars she received the first time we fought the enemy humans alongside Mel-Nie. Scars that I caressed each night while we drifted in the swimming half sleep. The water tastes familiar, and in the twilight I spot the promontory at the head of the bay. We’re close.

At dawn, we surface in a roiling ocean. I have to leap twice to catch a glimpse of the bridge, stretching from headland to headland, gleaming the color of the sunrise. “Is this home?” Hoon-Epp asks, as he breaches beside me.

“Yes,” I say, “and no. This is where I wait for my old pod. If they live, they will meet me here.”

*

Another moon cycle passes before I hear the distant pings. Our pod has grown by four, and when Tae-May bears Hoon-Epp's calf, the pod will grow again. All of us swim out to sea, listening between the pings. Fifteen by my count, a fleet, but at least eleven are wounded, like the one-propellered ship I mistimed.

I lead my pod in a tight formation. We pass an underwater ship—a *submarine* Mel-Nie would call it—patrolling ahead of the fleet. It is as quiet as an orca stalking a sea lion, but still I can hear its faint mechanical quivers and know it for a friend. A quarter sun cycle later we reach the ten-whale ship in the center. She is huge but crippled, her voice like a mouthful of gravel. I cannot tell who she is, if she is indeed Ger-Ald, or just one of her sisters.

"Come," I say to my pod. I do not tell them that at the ten-whale ship's reduced speed this will be too easy. Even with my half fin, I leap onto the wave. Yet still I feel a surge of pride when the rest of my pod joins. The ride is uneven, the wave sluggish and irregular. And I miss Chi-La with a pain that burns worse than any flame. Yet she would want me to be here, leading, riding.

After allowing my pod a few moments to savor the bow wave, I leap out, arching my back, hoping a lookout will spot me. With a splash I land back in the water, peeling off to my right with powerful tail strokes. My pod follows.

Four heartbeats later the ping comes. *Tap*. The humans have seen me. I stop to listen, drifting, but they have nothing more to say. Just that solitary ping.

We linger in the stern wash, my pod leaping and playing on the wake as I spy-hop on the surface, trying to make out the glyphs on the ship's tail. The ten-whale ship has slowed, and I can now see how she lists, her left flank upturned and mangled. A chill shoots through me, colder than an arctic current: is she floundering? I sink slowly back under the waves.

The pings come in a torrent, some short, some long. The other dolphins stop and look at me. I drift slowly as in sleep, just an occasional flicker of my flukes, but with both sides of my mind wide open. Just like chirps and squeaks, the odd sequences make sense if I concentrate and think like a human, as Mel-Nie taught me.

“Welcome home,” the message says. “I missed you.”

I thrust upward, throwing my head, torso and haunches out of the water, tail flukes beating mightily. Soon an air squid takes off from the ten-whale ship, its tentacles whirling above it like a ship’s propeller. I leap and leap again, up into the aerial maelstrom. A black-clad body drops into the water. Hoon-Epp snarls and sprints forward to attack, but I call him off with a rapid series of chirps. A small head surfaces, and a pair of arms holds out a talker. I dip down and ease my snout into the halter.

“Hello,” Mel-Nie says. How strange it is to again hear these alien sounds and then hear the talker repeat them in pings and chirps. She pulls her mask off. Her face looks worn, and she bears a scar too, above one eye.

“Hello,” I chirp, the talker making strange words for her. “I like your scar.” Chi-La would have liked it too.

Mel-Nie’s lips turn up at the ends. A smile she calls it. “I knew you would. My mate, however, does not.” Another smile, real or not I cannot tell.

“Send him to me and I will butt some sense into him.” I breach and roll to show off my scar and stump. Chi-La always pretended to be jealous whenever I rolled for Mel-Nie. I right myself, not at all embarrassed, but the three females in my new pod titter. This is good.

Mel-Nie caresses my mutilated fin with her gloved hand. “Are you okay?”

“They call me Half-Fin now.” I roll again, adding in a playful splash with the stub.

She laughs, the sunlight glistening from her pale face, as we swim slowly side by side. “They call me Half-Leg.” She dives headfirst, one foot and one stump popping briefly out of the water.

I chortle, knowing this needs no translation. We match.

“Thanks for saving my life,” she says. “If you hadn’t dragged me to that beach on Okinawa, I would’ve drowned.”

My flanks burn again with the memory of those flames. I choke on the chirps and squeaks as I motion toward the wounded ship with my good fin. “Your ten-whale ship sounds so frail. Is she really Ger-Ald?”

“She’s badly damaged, but yup, that carrier is our old friend, the *Gerald R. Ford*. Don’t worry, we’ll repair her. After fifty years of service, she’s still one tough lady.”

I try to flex my facial muscles to form a smile. Mel-Nie is a tough lady too. “And your pod, do they survive? Can they be... repaired?”

Mel-Nie’s blue eyes search mine for two heartbeats. “Fourteen ships went down that night. Three thousand sailors died: drowned, burned or worse. But if Chi-La hadn’t thrown herself into the submarine’s propeller, thousands more would have perished.”

I am happy for Mel-Nie, glad that Ger-Ald lives. Yet my flukes still droop at the mention of Chi-La. Nestling my head into Mel-Nie’s thin arms, I listen to her sobs, as the swell lifts and lowers us, my flukes gently pushing us toward Ger-Ald.

“I am sorry for your loss,” she says in a coarse whisper, as a fresh wave of warm tears mingles with the cold sea spray on my face. “For our loss. I loved her too.”

The ships wait patiently while Mel-Nie is hoisted back up. I leap onto the bow wave as Ger-Ald gains speed, heading toward the bridge. A light rain is falling now, although the sun shines through. My new pod beside me, the memory of Chi-La safe in my heart and the half-legged Mel-Nie safe above me, I ride the bow wave home.

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SECOND PLACE

Kay McSpadden recently retired as a teacher in a rural South Carolina high school. Her fiction has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Cobalt*, and *Chautauqua*. In 2012 she won the Norman Mailer Center Fiction Prize, and in 2017 she was a finalist in the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Festival Fiction Contest.

Fireworks Over Disney

by Kay McSpadden

“So, I heard you’re a perv. Is that right?”

Except to grip the steering wheel tighter, Waylon doesn’t react. Years of teaching high school has armored him against snarky teenagers. The one in the back seat—the one trying to get a rise out of him—causes hardly a ripple in Waylon’s blood pressure. From the corner of his eye, he sees Marianne shift in her seat, sending some signal to her teenaged son behind her. Waylon tries not to notice. He looks out at the road instead.

I-95 is the spine of the East coast, from Maine to Florida. Like most Interstate highways, it’s crowded and flavorless, plowing past scenic overlooks and dreary countryside brush with crazy indifference. In some parts of the country, it offers views of mountains and valleys. In Florida it is so flat that the horizon recedes like an optical illusion. No surprises, just miles of featureless scrub and orange groves and boggy wetlands interrupted by billboards for gas stations and souvenir stands.

Waylon hates driving on the Interstate. He particularly hates driving through Florida, and he wouldn’t be doing it if Marianne hadn’t insisted they take a trip now that Covid is on the wane. He lives in Georgia close to the Florida border, so

every vacation ends up being in Florida. Why drive the distance across Georgia to go to South Carolina? What's worth seeing there, except maybe Charleston? You can't even gamble properly in South Carolina. Florida has more beaches and gambling. Win win, if you like those kinds of things.

The teenager in the back seat—the one Waylon didn't know would be coming on this trip—sighs audibly. “I could really use some lunch,” he says. His voice is surprisingly deep for such a thin person. He can't weigh more than 100, tops. Waylon glances in the rearview mirror and watches him—Deets—brush his long blonde hair out of his eyes.

Deets can't be his real name. Maybe Waylon misunderstood Marianne when she introduced him. “You don't mind if *Deets/Pete/Keats* joins us, do you? His older sister was supposed to keep him this weekend but she can't. Is it okay?” Of course it isn't okay. Waylon has plans. *Plans*. Plans with this woman he hasn't been dating that long. Plans for late dinners and walks on the beach and showers together and sex, yes, mostly sex. Now this kid. Where is the kid going to stay? Not in their room. That won't do at all. The miserable Interstate, the greasy road food, the heat radiating in sheets from the hood of his car, the filthy gas station bathrooms—he might as well have spared himself all that and stayed home if the kid is staying in their room.

“I said, I could really use some lunch.” Deets raises his voice over the thrum of the engine and the whoosh of the air on Marianne's side of the car. From time to time, she lifts her cigarette to her lips and then holds it close to the two inches of open window, a useless gesture that somehow makes her seem more thoughtful than she is.

“Maybe we'll stop at the next exit,” she says. “If Waylon says we can.”

The way she says this—casting him as a prison guard or a dictator—annoys him more than any of Deets' snark. Waylon's always been obliging and courtly with her. Too much so, really. Too differential when he didn't want to be. Mr. Agreeable, letting her make most of their choices and rarely ever objecting to anything—not even to the seedy restaurants she preferred or the mindless movies she selected on Netflix.

They met at a sobriety support group at a local Methodist church. Not AA, nothing that organized. Just a bunch of former drunks trying to win back custody of their kids or reduce their court fines. And a few people, like him, who need some accountability to stay sober—even something as slight as strangers meeting twice a week in a leaky basement. It helps, somehow. So he goes. Rarely misses.

Marianne the same, bonded over the subliminal pull of booze. Or not subliminal most of the time. The *siren call* of booze. The tickle in the back of his throat when he sees someone drinking at Golden Wok or Outback. When he sees ads for beer or whiskey on TV. When he almost turns in to the parking lot of the liquor store on the way back from dropping his daughter off after his weekends with her.

“If I don’t eat soon, I’m going to fucking throw up,” Deets says over the car noise.

Marianne twists in her seat and slaps at the air. “Watch your language,” she says. “Waylon doesn’t like it.”

There she is again, setting him up as the bad guy. It’s a side of her he’s never seen before, but then he’s never seen her with Deets before. Never knew he existed. What does that say about how well he knows Marianne? Or how well she knows him?

Did she ever mention having a kid? Has he told her he has a daughter? Did he tell her why he isn’t teaching anymore? Of course not, though Deets might have heard something, probably on one of those ubiquitous social media sites. TikTok or Instagram or Snapchat. Gossip and innuendo taken as gospel truth by people too young and stupid to know the difference.

At the next intersection Waylon pulls into a gas station with a Denny’s attached. Deets slides into a booth with a torn seat and to Waylon’s surprise, Marianne slides in beside her son. So that’s how it’s going to be. Waylon feels the promise of vacation sex fading.

When the waitress tries to hand them menus, Deets waves his away.

“I already know what I want,” he says. “Pancakes and French fries and a strawberry milkshake.”

“You need some protein,” Marianne says. “You want some bacon?”

Deets makes a gagging noise.

“He thinks he’s a vegetarian,” Marianne says, though Waylon can’t tell if she’s talking to him or to the waitress. Deets, however, turns to the waitress and says, “*I am* a vegetarian. Meat’s gross.”

“Yeah, I get it,” the waitress says, and for the first time Waylon looks at her. A teenager, a sprinkle of acne across her cheeks, her messy ponytail held up with a purple scrunchie. Except for the Denny’s uniform, she could be a student sitting in one of his classes. Or could have been.

He holds his open menu like a curtain. Nothing on it looks palatable, as if someone took the photographs with a broken Polaroid. Deets might be on to something with pancakes and French fries and milkshake.

“I’ll have that, too,” Waylon says. Marianne snorts. Deets cuts his eyes at Waylon, the way kids do when they want you to know they are not falling for any of your friendliness shit. Waylon hands the menu back to the teenaged waitress.

Marianne orders coffee and slips out of the booth. “I need to get some more cigarettes,” she says to Waylon. “You got some change?”

She takes the twenty he hands her and heads down the aisle toward the gas station part of the building.

“You know she’s lying,” Deets says.

“What d’you mean?”

“She’s got plenty of cigarettes. They’re in her purse. She’s going to gamble.”

It’s true that the gas station has slot machines near the register. Waylon noticed them on the way in, though he paid more attention to the refrigerated cooler stocked with booze.

“That’s okay,” he says, not because it is but because Deets is smirking. “I mean, she’s a grown woman. She can gamble if she wants to.”

Deets shrugs. “It’s not my money.”

He has a point. Since leaving his teaching job, Waylon’s paid his bills working for various shopping apps—Instacart, Uber Eats, DoorDash. The pandemic was a godsend, and to his surprise he was able to actually save a little, even after paying child support and his own living expenses. This weekend with Marianne is a way to blow some money and some steam at the same time. Or it was supposed to be. Waylon narrows his eyes at Deets.

At once he’s ashamed of the intense dislike he has for this boy. Deets has done nothing any other unhappy teenager wouldn’t do if he were being dragged off with his mother and her stranger boyfriend. What kid wouldn’t be much happier left alone, at home? What was it Marianne had said, that his sister couldn’t keep him?

“How old are you?”

Deets bristles. “Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious,” Waylon says, hiding his annoyance. “Since we’re going to spend some time together, I thought I’d get to know you a little bit.”

“Who said we’re going to spend time together?”

“We’re spending time together now.”

Before Deets can respond, the waitress appears, a tray teetering on one palm. Waylon watches as she unloads it faster than seems prudent, milkshakes and pancakes and piles of fries suddenly arrayed before him.

Deets is a delicate eater, using his thumb and forefinger to pincer his French fries one by one. When his plate is empty, he turns to the stack of pancakes, picks one up, and tears it into bite-size pieces. Waylon watches with morbid fascination.

“Is that how you always eat pancakes?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, I guess. I just thought you’d want a fork, you know, so the syrup doesn’t get all over your hands?”

“I don’t use syrup,” Deets says. He punctuates this by putting a naked piece of pancake in his mouth.

“Isn’t that... boring? With no syrup?”

Deets stop chewing and glares. “What’s it to you?”

Where is Marianne? Waylon shifts in the booth and looks over his shoulder, but she’s still AWOL.

“She won’t be back until she blows it all,” Deets says.

Waylon takes a pull of the milkshake. It’s chalky and tastes like unpronounceable chemicals. Before he can stop himself, he gags out loud. Deets looks up and snickers.

“How do you drink that?” Waylon says. “When I was your age, milkshakes were creamy and silky and, and *good*. They were nectar,” he says, rolling the word on his tongue. “They made life worth living.” Waylon gags again for emphasis.

Deets laughs, and to his surprise, Waylon realizes that he’s slipped back into performing, the way teachers do when they want their students’ attention. It feels good.

“Huh,” Deets says. “So how old are *you*?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Deets grins and extends the joke. “Well, if we’re going to be spending time together....”

“I’m 37,” Waylon says, his face deadpan, his tone serious. Back when he was in the classroom, he would shift this way to signal to his students that the discussion had

turned real, that their laughter and teasing were preludes to the learning about to unfold. *Let's get serious, people.* Those were the best moments, when his small-town students lifted their eyes to the wider world—to issues of race and class and history and politics and violence and whether or not an objective truth could be winkled out of the deluge—and he rode that crest of their enthusiasm and energy like a surfer.

“I’m 15,” Deets says. “And I think this milkshake is fucking tasty.”

Waylon recognizes this for what it is, a shot across the bow. A warning to be taken seriously. Or a plea by a troubled boy.

Or maybe just unhappy the way all teenagers are unhappy, in limbo and on the brink.

So much to ignore, when you spend time with kids.

*

When Marianne finally reappears, she takes one sip of her cold coffee and says she’s ready to go.

“Why are you in such a mood?” Deets says when they are back on the road. Marianne is on her second cigarette before she answers.

“You wanna get in the pool, right? We have to get there before the pool closes.”

“I hate swimming,” Deets says. “I thought you said we were going to Disney.”

This is news to Waylon. Disney is Disney World, of course, and along with SeaWorld and Universal Studios it has turned sleepy Orlando into a theme park mecca. Orlando’s also the home of smaller parks and zoos and miniature golf and themed restaurants, but everyone thinks of Disney when they think of Orlando. The ticket prices are outrageous and Waylon doesn’t have enough money. More than that, he doesn’t have any interest in going. When his daughter was four, Waylon and his ex-wife spent a miserable two days waiting in two-hour lines for rides that lasted two minutes, eating expensive ice cream shaped like Mickey

Mouse heads and pushing their shy daughter into one-sided interactions with costumed performers who seemed sweaty and feverish in the July humidity.

“You’d hate it,” Waylon says with a swiftness that belies any objectivity in the matter. “It’s just for little kids anyway.”

“No, it’s not,” Deets says. “They have some killer roller coasters. If we aren’t even going, why did you make me come on this fucking trip?”

Marianne throws her cigarette out the crack in the window. “The beach is nice. They probably have a roller coaster there.”

Orlando doesn’t have a beach. It’s halfway between coasts, straddling the middle of the state like a blister on a thumb. Waylon says nothing. In the rearview mirror, he watches Deets scootch down in the backseat. He wishes he could do the same—sink down, close his eyes, pretend he’s somewhere else.

But he doesn’t. He glances over at Marianne and realizes, like someone just waking up, that they never really did say where they were going. Did she ever mention Orlando? He can’t remember. Wasn’t there some discussion about Daytona? To see a race, maybe? Or Cocoa? Checking out the space stuff at the cape? Since when has he become so drifty, so ill-prepared for the future? Had he been this way before the divorce? Or when he was still in the classroom? Surely not. The kids would have eaten him alive.

“Just drive,” Marianne says, as if she can read his mind. “Something will come up.”

The view through the windshield becomes a succession of low-slung motels, fluorescent-colored souvenir stands, gas stations, and scabby palm trees. By late afternoon Deets is snoring in the back seat. Marianne’s head bobs forward until she startles herself awake and sits up, over and over. From this angle, her jawline is puffy and Waylon sees fine lines radiating from her lips and creases on her closed eyelids, details he missed before. The details she’s shared in group—her history with alcohol, her youthful flirtation with heroin—tell him almost nothing important. He has no idea who she voted for in the last election or what she thinks about when she daydreams or why she’s never mentioned having children or what she’s heard about him. He doesn’t know because he hasn’t asked. And he hasn’t

asked because he's caught in this inertia, this *driftiness* that surprises him—he who once gloried in complex lesson plans and drove his ex-wife nuts with a weekly chart of chores for them both, who knew what he would pack each day for his lunch and felt uneasy about the serendipity of weather.

After they pass the sign for Cape Canaveral he turns off the highway and rolls into the first motel he sees. When he cuts the engine, Marianne and Deets pop up like prairie dogs.

"I'll see if they have rooms." Waylon starts out of the car and is surprised when Deets is suddenly at his side. They crunch across a parking lot of oyster shells toward a two-story motel.

"This doesn't bode well," Waylon says, pointing to a neon sign of a smiling crocodile. He darts a glance at Deets and catches him stifling a yawn.

The interior doesn't bode well, either. Like many older motels, the carpet is rough with invisible sand. Saltwater has corroded the exposed metal stair rails. Even the vegetation, such as it is, seems blighted by an excess of sunlight.

They get adjacent rooms with a connecting door, Waylon grasping at some dim hope for privacy and sex. The fire escape map shows a pool and patio area on the far end of the property. A diner to the left of the parking lot is open all night. Next to it, a tiny, shuttered ticket booth advertises casino cruises.

At least the beach is right across the road.

Marianne says she has a headache and needs to lie down—would Waylon please take Deets out for awhile? Waylon expects Deets to resist and is surprised when Deets follows him mutely down the corroding staircase and across the road. Waylon slips off his shoes and carries them, and after a moment of trying to walk through the sand with his oversized sneakers, Deets does, too.

The beach is a place of contrasts—sand so hot that Waylon and Deets are forced to take mincing little hops across it to water so cold they yelp in surprise. The wind makes them shiver one moment and sweat the next—chilly blasts interrupted by dead, hot air.

“See this,” Waylon says, scooping up a shell. He rolls it onto his palm and offers it to Deets, who picks it up with the same delicate care he’d shown eating French fries.

“It’s a calico scallop,” Waylon says. “See the purple striations? The purple markings? That’s what differentiates it from a regular scallop.”

Again Waylon has the uncanny sensation that he’s back in the classroom, using words he’s pretty sure Deets won’t know and then slyly defining them in context. It’s a trick he learned early in his career, teaching vocabulary pre-emptively to spare his students the embarrassment of asking. *Mr. Jones talks to you like you’re a grown-up*, he’d heard a student say once. He recognized it as the compliment it was.

“What’s this one?” Deets says, picking up a hinged shell as thin and small as his fingernail. He places it on Waylon’s upturned palm.

“I love these,” Waylon says. “See how these are two halves of the same animal? They’re coquinas. My daughter calls them angel shells. See how they look like a pair of wings?”

Deets nods. “How old’s your daughter?”

Waylon drops the coquinas to the sand. “Eight. She lives with her mom.”

“Yeah,” Deets says, as if this confirms something. “That’s too bad.”

*

Marianne is dressed in a short black cocktail dress when they return.

“You were gone forever,” she says. “I’m ready for dinner. Hurry up and let’s beat the crowd.”

Dinner is as boring as lunch, except this time they are seated in a red leather booth in an upscale seafood restaurant in one of the local casinos. Shortly after ordering, Marianne excuses herself.

“You know where she’s going.”

“I can guess,” Waylon says. He’s not as annoyed as he has every right to be.

This time Marianne returns as Deets and Waylon are eating dessert. Deets is busy explaining skateboard tricks and Waylon is feigning interest. Neither pauses when Marianne sits and picks at her shrimp cocktail. A waiter—not theirs—passes and she snags him to order a vodka martini.

“What?” she says to answer the question Waylon doesn’t ask. “It’s vacation. I’m only going to have one.”

But she has two in quick succession.

Back at the motel, she falls asleep with her dress still on. Waylon watches a rerun of *Gilligan’s Island* with Deets until Marianne rouses and Waylon retreats to their room.

It’s not the vacation he imagined for himself, but then, he has to admit he didn’t really imagine much past getting in the car. It’s shameful to be so lost, without a map. Maybe tomorrow he can pull himself together enough to line up something fun for them all. An arcade, or a carnival. He thinks he saw a skatepark on the way in. If Marianne is up for it, they could drive out to the space museum. Deets would probably like that.

Marianne’s turned on her side, and as he slides under the coverlet and slips his hand to cup one breast, he hears a long shuddering snore.

He rolls back over and wonders if Deets would want to climb to the top of the lighthouse on the Cape.

*

Marianne sleeps so late the next morning that by the time they stumble into the diner next door, breakfast is over. *No* to pancakes, *no* to eggs, *no* to anything other than hamburgers and chicken fingers. Marianne picks at her food but Deets and Waylon finish two milkshakes each.

"This is what a milkshake should taste like," Waylon says with triumph. Deets shrugs and nods reluctant agreement.

"That was an exemplary meal!" Waylon tells the waitress, startling her. Marianne settles back and lights a cigarette.

"How about we get our ducks in a row?" Waylon says. *"You know, plan the rest of the day?"*

"My day's already planned," Marianne says. *"I told you, I'm doing the casino cruise."*

Deets' face is flushed, his voice brittle. *"No, you didn't."*

"When did you decide that?" Waylon says. He tries not to sound as angry as Deets but Marianne isn't fooled. She stubs out her cigarette and stands up.

"I told you both last night. You can go if you want. I haven't bought my ticket yet."

"You said we were going to Disney," Deets says. *"That's the only thing I want to do. You never said nothing about some fucking cruise!"* He slams the table with his hand. *"Screw you!"*

Marianne lifts one eyebrow and walks out.

Waylon sees the other customers take note. *"You really shouldn't talk to your mother that way."*

Deets slides down in the booth and crosses his arms. *"She's not my mother. She's my grandmother."*

Waylon has no time to digest this before Deets adds, *"And she's a fucking liar."*

"So, your—"

Waylon stops himself. Nothing he finds out about Marianne would surprise him. He hardly knows her, after all. Doesn't know her at all, apparently. His mouth

waters with the tang of something metallic and sour, something a beer or a whiskey would take away.

“Come on,” he says to Deets. “Let’s go to Disney.”

“Really?”

“We’re not that far. An hour away, maybe.”

Deets is transformed from sulky teenager to anxious child in an instant. “We’re really going to go? You aren’t just saying that to shut me up?”

“We’re really going to go,” Waylon says, heading across the sea of oyster shells to the car. “Unless—”

“Unless what?” Deets is as wary as a cat.

“Unless you would rather go on a casino cruise. With Marianne. With... your grandmother.”

*

It’s more than an hour to Orlando. The traffic is slowed by road construction for part of the way and by a three-car wreck on the last leg. Still, Deets hums and buzzes with palpable excitement. He keeps up a running tally of what he knows about Disney World—Space Mountain and Splash Mountain and the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad.

“That’s a bunch of mountains,” Waylon says, but Deets ignores him.

“I want to do the Star Wars stuff,” he says, “and the Guardians of the Galaxy rides.”

“That’s a lot,” Waylon says. “I don’t know if we have enough time.” It’s already late in the afternoon. The sun is almost at the tops of the palm trees.

Deets goes silent.

“I mean,” Waylon hastens to add, “we’ll still have fun doing what we have time for. Right?”

At that Deets brightens. “Something is better than nothing,” he says like a mantra, which Waylon thinks later it probably is.

Deets’ mood continues to rise as they get to Orlando and follow the signs to Disney World. He laughs out loud when they cross under the large welcome arch and pull into a line of cars at a tollbooth.

The young woman behind the glass is dressed in what looks like a pink tuxedo.

“That’ll be \$25,” she says with the smile of someone delivering good news.

“Seriously,” Waylon says, fishing in his pocket for his wallet. “That’s for two?”

“Two?” The young woman’s smile doesn’t waver.

“Two tickets? For us?” He motions towards Deets who gives a little wave.

“Oh, no, sir, that’s just the parking fee. If you haven’t bought your tickets online, you’ll have to purchase them at the front gate.”

But Waylon isn’t listening. The pocket where he keeps his wallet is empty.

“Wait,” he tells the smiling woman. “I can’t find—”

More rustling, a frantic squirming through each pocket, beads of sweat erupting in his armpits and across his forehead, and finally he has to acknowledge defeat.

“I can’t, I mean, I think I must have lost my wallet.”

“You can turn around up ahead on the left and exit there.” The woman’s voice is as pitiless as her smile. Beside him, he feels rather than sees Deets go dark.

They pull out of the line of cars and stop at the turnaround. Waylon bends down and slides his hand under the driver’s seat.

“Look under your side,” he says, but Deets doesn’t move. “It might have fallen out—”

“She has it.”

“What?”

“You know she does. She took it.”

Waylon sits up and puts his hands on the top of the steering wheel. The truth presses him into his seat and short circuits his ability to speak. Minutes pass. Waylon listens to Deets’ erratic breathing growing softer and steadier. At last he starts the car and they drive out of the park.

He’s afraid to put any words to the betrayal, but silence is worse. As wronged as he feels, he knows that the young teenager sitting beside him is shaken by the loss. Not of Disney, although that *is* a blow, but by what Marianne has done, or chosen, or perhaps felt compelled to do. What she couldn’t stop herself from doing.

“Hey,” he says, “you know the best part of going to Disney World, don’t you?”

Deets says nothing. His face is turned halfway to the window.

“It’s the fireworks. Every night as soon as it’s dark enough, they shoot off these massive fireworks over that dumb fake castle, and all the people *ooh* and *ahh* and then go home.”

Deets shrugs.

“You might not know this,” Waylon says, “but fireworks are awesome. The Chinese invented them way back when Europeans were still living in mud huts. Figured out how to put black powder inside paper tubes and set them on fire.”

Waylon drops his patter.

“Look, this didn’t turn out like you wanted, but we can still see those fireworks. You can see them from the road. We can go grab some milkshakes and find a place to park and then watch the show. What do you think?”

What he misses most about working with teenagers is their unpredictability. Back when his life was regimented, both by his school schedule and with his own self-imposed order, the surprising things teenagers did and said were a necessary counterpoint to his stodgy world. That Deets might scream in rage is as likely as

his offering Marianne forgiveness and absolution. Being with him now, quiet and steady, is what Waylon knows how to do.

“No thanks,” Deets says. “I’m okay. It’s just fireworks.”

Waylon waits a beat, then says, “But they *are* pretty amazing.”

He doesn’t mind sitting here in the Florida heat if this disappointed boy wants that. He doesn’t mind waiting for twilight and getting a crick in his neck scanning the sky for fireworks. He likes seeing controlled explosions in the sky. He likes knowing that people can make things beautiful with fire.

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THIRD PLACE

This author did not submit a biography.

Paper Cut

by Mary Pastorello

The group of rowdy girls filed onto the yellow bus. Miriam was one of the first, and slid onto an olive green vinyl seat mid-way down the row of seats to her right. As other girls followed on, she quickly hoisted her duffel bag up next to her, claiming the place where another girl might otherwise sit, and leaned into the corner of her seat. Nestling her head against a window partially opened by possibly the driver or a previous rider, Miriam inhaled deeply the sweet, warm air of a New England September day and waited as the other girls boarded and claimed their own seats.

Miriam was grateful for the bag next to her and tenderly laid her right arm across it, as if in thanks for the barrier it quietly and naturally afforded her. With the bag on the remaining half of her seat there was no room for another girl to sit, even if one had wanted to. Her shoulders relaxed as her body realized that it would not have to feign indifference as each and every girl sauntered by her, plopping onto other seats in twos, sometimes threes, chatting and laughing.

Eventually, the bus filled with the other members of her field hockey team and when the coach had completed the roll call of players' names, the bus slowly heaved and groaned its way out of the parking lot of Miriam's school to begin its hour-long trip down country roads toward another school's field.

An excited energy pulsed throughout the bus, as it did before every away game. The fact that the team had won less than half of its games had not dampened the

players' spirits. The girls collectively understood that these bus trips afforded them a few blessed hours away from whatever expository writing or Latin assignments waited patiently and menacingly in their backpacks for them after the game, and that was reason enough to feel festive. As the bus moved along, the girls talked loudly and laughed freely. Every once in a while, an excited scream peppered the air as the players shared stories about teachers, or parties, or boys they liked.

Miriam was no exception. She was grateful to have a break from the stresses of school work. From her seat by the window, she could hear bits and pieces of many of the conversations

swirling around her and let the cadence of the girls' conversations distract her from worrying about an upcoming Greek test she was, once again, wholly unprepared for.

Miriam followed along with the conversations near her, to the extent she could. Every once in a while, she would lean over her bag toward the aisle to ask a question, which often went unanswered by the group. And though she knew her contributions were neither required nor appreciated, she continued to insert herself. When a question was not answered Miriam simply waited for an opportunity to throw out an exaggerated, "Whaaat?" or "No way!?"

Had she not, she would not have been a part of any conversation at all.

Miriam had learned over the years that anything was better than being invisible. Long before this bus trip, she had realized that forcing her inclusion, even if superficial, was a far less painful position to be in than to sit quietly and alone, openly ignored and on the outside of the interconnected lives of her peers. Never excluded, but never actually included, unless she made the effort.

By having mastered the fine art of making it seem as though she was perfectly comfortable in her ability to speak up and make herself relevant, she had found a sort of sweet spot, she felt, in the role of the confident girl who was equally friendly with everyone. If she made enough noise—If she appeared open, relaxed,

and nonchalantly engaged—Miriam figured she could hide in the distraction of the hectic cacophony of the lives of all of the other teenage girls.

It was a difficult and exhausting dance at times, though: the constant attempt at feigned indifference, mixed with an aching dose of forced self-confidence. As practiced as Miriam was at this one-sided banter, it was still hard for her. And every once in a while, she needed to lean back in her seat by the window and with steady, focused breaths remind herself that she needed to keep up her energy in order to come across as interested and that it was better to look like she was being included, even when she wasn't.

She needed to make it seem as though she was not everything she already believed she was, so that nobody else should know.

The bus soon merged onto a busier road and several girls around her closed their windows against the louder, faster moving air. With the windows now closed, Miriam could make out more clearly some of the conversations near her. Just across the aisle, she tracked the details shared by one classmate with the team's captain about an upcoming party at the house of a senior from a neighboring boys' school. Miriam watched with quiet envy as a girl next to the

two jumped up and leaned over her seat to let two other girls know about the party. Soon after, a third girl behind Miriam essentially invited herself to the party, casually and comfortably laughing.

Studying the exchange, Miriam understood that this would not be a time for her to interject. She had never been to these girls' houses, despite having been in school with them, having played on teams with them, and having been in orchestra with them for several years. It would have been folly for her to involve herself in a conversation about a party that she was not meant to attend.

Instead, Miriam pretended not to hear and looked down at part of one white thigh that peeked out from her field hockey skirt, noticing how bluish purple her skin seemed against the green of her seat. She began to slowly trace several moles on her leg that had always repulsed her, reflexively losing herself in silent prayer. Miriam prayed that each group of girls around her might continue to believe that

Miriam wasn't part of their friend group because she was part of some other group of friends.

The party conversation soon gave way to another about a good looking, young math teacher newly hired to the school and Miriam resumed her intermittent interactions, strategically calculated for impact and appropriateness. The conversation stopped abruptly when a girl from the back of the bus, one of the best players on the team, knelt on her seat and yelled forward toward the group of girls that surrounded Miriam, "Peyyyyyyton! French braid my hair for the game?"

Miriam watched from her corner seat as Peyton, the team's goalie, looked toward the front of the bus to make sure neither the coach nor driver was looking and then deftly hopped from aisle seat to aisle seat until she had positioned herself in the last row of the bus. As Peyton had moved toward the back of the bus, Miriam mulled over the casual confidence the "ask" for a braid had required, repeating the intonation and word syntax over in her mind, pocketing away its lessons for her own eventual use someday.

But Miriam knew she'd never really be in a position to ask such a question, no matter how rehearsed and perfected. She exhaled deeply. Both braider and braidee were beautiful. It was as simple as that. Miriam accepted that it was beauty that provided these girls with the privilege of knowing that they would not be rejected. Both girls—lean, blond, tan, and toned—were graced with delicate features and wide, easy smiles. Because of this, Miriam understood, they had friends, they dated, and they went, Miriam knew, to each other's houses on weekends.

Miriam's longing to be like them—or, better, to be seen by others as they were seen—burned inside her. Without realizing, Miriam started again to trace the freckles on her pale thigh.

Miriam watched from the safety of her seat as girl after girl discreetly made their way back to Peyton for a quick French braid for the game. As she studied the braiding session, Miriam's mouth clenched tightly. She cocked her head to one side and ran her tongue quickly back and forth against the inside of her upper molars. Miriam tried to imagine herself doing the same: casually joining the line for a team braid.

Having no sisters, and never having had any close friends, Miriam had always desperately wanted, but had never had, her hair in French braids, and was convinced that the hairstyle might help to make her plain, round face more attractive. With a sudden sense of urgency, it dawned on Miriam that this was her first and maybe only chance to finally have one. With a deep breath, Miriam boldly decided she would take the chance. She would ask for a braid.

Just as she had made her decision, Miriam panicked to see that the line had thinned out for hair braiding. Fearing that the braiding session might soon end, Miriam worked on mustering the courage needed to ask if Peyton might do a “quick braid” for her as well. Only after she had practiced in her head several different ways of asking for a braid did Miriam finally stand up from her seat and, slightly light-headed, carefully make her way back to the braiding station, making sure to unclench her sweaty fists along the way. Leaving the safety of her trusted duffle bag, Miriam crouch-walked down the aisle toward the back of the bus, careful that neither the coach nor the driver would notice her either.

Close enough now to Peyton, Miriam slid into a nearby open seat, positioning herself to make her request. Twice, Miriam inhaled deeply, and blurted out a casual, “Hey can you do my hair, too?” But twice another girl had asked louder and had, while asking, slid herself onto the seat in front of Peyton for Peyton to lean over to braid that girl’s hair.

Miriam was fairly certain that Peyton had heard her but convinced herself that it was reasonably possible that the commotion and excitement of the impromptu hair session had drowned out her question and so she waited, patiently.

When the last girl had finally had her hair braided, Miriam let the girl stand up and move back to her seat. For an impossibly long moment Miriam waited for Peyton, who had undoubtedly seen Miriam move to the seat closest to the braiding seat, to turn to her to invite her for her own braid. Instead, Miriam saw Peyton insert herself awkwardly into a conversation

across the aisle. Miriam now found herself in the devastatingly uncomfortable space of having asked a question, twice, that she knew had been heard but ignored.

Pushing past the indignity of the moment, and in her tried-and-true method of aggressively asserting herself as a means to vanquish her invisibility, Miriam heaved herself up from her seat, trying on for size the open, carefree confidence of each of the girls who had gone before her. She slid herself into the now open braided seat, turning back to face Peyton as she did, and threw out a loud, “Can I get a braid, too?”

This time, her question, too loud, too brusque, hung, crisp and clear, suspended between the two girls.

As soon as Miriam had spoken the words, unanswered, she regretted having made the request. Peyton’s stunned expression was all the answer Miriam needed.

Miriam immediately yearned to take her question back and to retreat to the safety of her seat and trusty duffel bag toward the front of the bus.

After what felt like an eternity, Peyton smiled, and for a moment Miriam thought maybe she had gotten it wrong, that maybe she had seamlessly inserted herself into the pre-game ritual that everyone else had enjoyed.

She had not. Miriam perceived something in Peyton’s demeanor had changed, despite the smile. It was a subtle change, an almost imperceptible change, but Miriam, who had spent a teenage lifetime studying others, recognized it immediately. A stiffness registered in Peyton’s demeanor—one that had not been there with the other girls—and Miriam felt the presence of an invisible, rigid wall that had shot up between the two girls, built from the weighty awkwardness that Miriam had created.

Miriam cringed when she saw Peyton’s eyes dart around her looking desperately for a conversation that might require her participation, looking, Miriam was sure, for a reason—any reason—to avoid having to braid Miriam’s hair.

As Peyton scanned, Miriam considered the desperate desire both girls felt to extricate themselves from the exchange, and her mind raced trying to figure out a way for both girls to step away unscathed, even if Miriam knew that the damage had already been done. Miriam came to the dreaded realization that there really was no graceful exit for either.

Both she and Peyton knew full well that Peyton could not say no to Miriam: Peyton had braided all of the other girls' hair and there was still ample time on the bus ride to do a quick

braid. Miriam had known that Peyton would have to acquiesce when she'd asked for the braid, but only now did it occur to her that the form of a "yes" also mattered.

To retreat back to her seat with no braid was not an option. To do so would have meant that Miriam would have had to openly accept the rejection, the rejection that had loomed above her for so many years—the one that followed Miriam into every classroom, down every hall, on every team, on every bus—ready to attack. The one whose existence Miriam had worked so hard and for so long to deny.

A stoic Miriam reigned in her frantic thoughts and reminded herself that if it was not acknowledged, it did not exist.

She would have her braid.

She would be included.

But as it turned out, Miriam did not have to force the braid. After a beat, and to Miriam's relief, Peyton demurred with a soft spoken, "Sure."

With a quick, slight nod, Miriam leaned back against the seat in front of Peyton so that Peyton could do her braid. Miriam closed her eyes and sat very still in anticipation.

A few seconds passed. Then a few more. And more. But still Miriam felt no fingers on her head.

"Sorry, I don't have any more elastics," Peyton finally blurted.

Miriam opened her eyes and, pulling a black hair band off of her wrist, countered, "That's OK, I have one."

Peyton sighed in acceptance.

Miriam leaned once again against the vinyl seat, readying herself for the braid that would make her like everyone else.

Again, a second, then several, then many passed, and Miriam felt nothing on her head.

Instead, Peyton spoke hesitantly. “Ummm, sorry to ask, but have you washed your hair recently?”

This time it was Peyton’s words that dangled in the air suspended between the two.

Miriam froze, stunned.

Miriam thought about her long brown hair, washed that morning, and wondered if because it wasn’t blond like the other girls’ that maybe it looked dirtier than theirs. Her mind racing, she considered whether it was possible that asking if hair was clean was a typical

question a braider might pose. But while Miriam had waited for her braid, she hadn’t heard Peyton ask anyone else that question. Only her.

All at once, Miriam felt filthy. Did she smell? Is that why Peyton had asked? Her head filled with images of her own wide, pale face, her large pasty freckled thighs, her long, stringy brown hair over bushy eyebrows covering a too narrow nose—all of the parts that together made her her—and was deeply ashamed. Drawing her legs together and her arms close to her core, she drew in a sharp breath in the knowledge that she had finally and actually been seen for what she really was.

Time stood still in the moment that it took for Miriam to recover. She steadied herself, and decided that she could not let Peyton’s question linger. Miriam determined that Peyton’s words simply could not be allowed an existence. It was as easy as that.

Miriam would simply have to destroy them, hide them, vanquish them before their power grew. And so, she ate them. She plucked them from the air and swallowed them, one by one, like sharp, jagged, shards of glass.

Only then, in her most casual, carefree voice did Miriam turn to Peyton, and exclaim, ‘Oh, yes, totally, I washed it this morning.’

Peyton nodded and looked as though she wanted to say something else. Miriam sat back in the seat, facing forward. The words were gone. Miriam had devoured Peyton’s cruel question, erasing it from her universe, ignoring the painful scraping it had caused as the words had moved down the back of her throat. She would have her braid now in exchange.

Miriam braced herself, and hardly breathed, as Peyton swiftly braided her hair. When it was done, the braid felt loose and was slightly crooked. Miriam stood, thanked Peyton quickly, and discreetly made her way to her seat.

The bus ride was now nearing an end, the team almost at the field. The steady din on the bus had grown softer but still pulsed. In her seat, alone, Miriam turned fully to gaze out the window and caught a reflection of her crooked new braid, very much aware that, unlike the other girls, she had paid for hers.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Ren Wednesday is a nonbinary queer writer and zine-maker who escaped London for Glasgow and doesn't want to go back. Their work is often concerned with feelings, textures, peculiarities and reality-slips. Their zine *High Precision Ghosts*, about Graham Chapman and growing up under Section 28 is part of a collection at the Museum of Youth Culture.

Frankie Cycles On

by Ren Wednesday

“I’m going,” said Frankie, and left. The bike’s kickstand snapped back with a metallic thunk and she put her weight onto the pedals, lifting off the seat to get traction. She glanced over her shoulder to where her girlfriend—her ex-girlfriend—stood outside the closed restaurant. Cora was looking down, only the top of her head illuminated by the streetlamp. Frankie rode on.

*

She pumped the pedals and shouted wordless frustration into the night; the sound echoed off the sandstone buildings and some pub stragglers answered with a mocking cheer. At the top of the road, she ran a red light into the path of a minicab. It blared its horn and sweat prickled her forehead as she swerved onto Great Western Road. Frankie spat, the beery glob of saliva splatting on the tarmac. She’d take the long way home, through the park. It would give her time to think.

*

She was about to turn right, towards the University, when a fox crossed the road ahead of her. It was a scraggly one, its tail sparse like a tree struggling to thrive.

“Not looking too great there, pal,” said Frankie.

“You’ve looked better yourself, if we’re dropping truth bombs,” said the fox.

Frankie startled, hit a pothole, lurched sideways off the bike and smacked her shin on the pedal. The bike bell jingled. Not only had the fox just spoken, it had done so in a familiar voice. It was that of her first boyfriend, Charlie, a bartending stoner who liked to take her dumpster diving for out-of-date food in the bins behind the Co-op. She hadn’t seen him in six years. When she righted herself the fox was dawdling at the entrance to the side street, as if waiting for her.

“Charlie?” she said.

“Sup,” said the fox.

“Why are you a fox?”

The fox scratched behind its ear. “Last thing I remember is eating some mushrooms, so I guess I’m hallucinating?”

“What? That’s not—” Frankie looked around, hoping to run this new reality by another person, but the street was empty. At a loss for what else to do, she got back on the bike. The fox, Charlie, followed her.

“Don’t worry. It’s chill. I think I’m a fox just for tonight,” he said.

“Well, I can’t deal with that right now, so I’m going to ignore you.”

“Cool beans.”

They passed a red-bricked High School and rows of bay-windowed tenements. The area reminded Frankie of studying for, and dropping out of, her degree programme. The flush of shame that came with that memory was comforting in its normality. That was the real world, not ex-boyfriends in the form of foxes. She accelerated to shake him off, the exertion making her sweaty. Charlie matched her pace. She slowed.

“Look, can you just go?” she said.

The fox thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think so. I’ve got this sense that hanging out with you is, like, my one true purpose as a fox, or something. I don’t want a bad trip.”

Frankie couldn’t tell if he was serious. Did foxes always look like they were smirking?

“Ugh, fine,” she said. “Just follow behind, then? No offence, but this is really weird.”

“As you wish.”

“I warn you, I’m not in a good mood. I think I just broke up with my girlfriend.”

Frankie stopped at the bottom of the street to catch her breath and inspect her scraped shin, disappointed that there wasn’t more blood. Charlie took the opportunity to lift his leg against a lamppost.

“Urgh,” said Frankie looking away from the jet of yellow piss.

“You’re still breaking up with people then?” he said.

Frankie ignored him. They passed the patchouli-scented tea shop popular with students—she’d fought with Cora there too, over cups of an acrid herbal tea called ‘Faeries Blood’. Outside the shop, a magpie perching on a mossy balustrade chattered, then took flight, gliding above Frankie’s head.

“Evening, babe,” it said.

“Oh no, not you.” Frankie pedalled fast, then hit traffic calming bumps that rattled the bike.

“What kind of greeting’s that?”

The magpie landed on Frankie’s handlebars and extended a black and white wing towards Charlie.

“I’m Elena,” the magpie said. “Frankie’s my problematic ex. And you?”

“Charlie. Frankie dumped me, but it’s cool.”

Elena’s eyes glinted. “Charlie?”

A food courier approached on an e-bike, a Spotify ad crackling from his phone. The animals drifted away from Frankie, then returned as he retreated.

“— As in, the Charlie who Frankie ditched just before going backpacking in Chile with, because she realised she was a les—”

“God!” Frankie swatted at the bird, who easily evaded her arm.

“Yup,” said Charlie. “That’s the one.”

Elena laughed a magpie cackle.

At the bottom of the street, Frankie caught the glint of broken glass too late. She swerved, but it was no use. The ground vibrated through the back wheel as it lost pressure.

“Shit.” Frankie got off the bike and looked at the deflating back tire. “Shit!” She let the bike clatter to the road and kicked at it in frustration, aware that she was being childish.

“Come on, babe. Breaking your toe isn’t going to help anything,” said Elena.

“Shame I’m a fox right now,” said Charlie. “I’m a boss at fixing punctures.”

Frankie picked up the bike with bad grace and walked it up the dark slope at the entrance to the park.

“You’re going through the park at this time?” said Elena, hanging back.

Frankie turned to her hangers-on. “If you don’t like it, feel free to leave!” she said. “Why are you two even here? What do you want?”

Charlie looked up from investigating a ketchup-smeared takeaway box. “I told you. I ate some weird mushrooms and I’m tripping balls,” he said.

Elena flew to the bike's handlebars, clipping Frankie on the side of the head with a wing as she passed.

"There's obviously some powerful magic going on," she said, "If only I had my tarot deck!"

Frankie stared. "Since when are you into tarot?"

"My girlfriend does readings. That's how we met, actually."

Frankie turned away from her, struck by a stab of jealousy. The magpie continued.

"So, my theory is you tapped into some ambient energy and manifested us here."

"Seriously? Why would I possibly want to manifest my exes? Seems more like a cosmic punishment to me." Frankie took a shortcut through the grass, her hi-tops dampening with dew. The bike's back wheel dragged on the soft surface, and she yanked it onwards.

"I'm actually reading this book and it explains everything," said Charlie. "Like, psychics, ghosts, lucid dreams, whatever—it's all because the universe is a hologram."

"See? the fox gets it!" Elena flew down and attempted an interspecies high-five.

*

The path they joined was unlit and cracked by tree roots, and Frankie stumbled; the bike seat hit her in the small of the back and Elena flew up in alarm.

"Careful," said Charlie, "I don't want to drag you to A&E by the ankles."

Frankie adjusted the headlamp to send more light ahead. The tarmac was so uneven that she had to concentrate on steering the bike through its hills and valleys.

"While I'm here I might as well be nosy," said Elena "You got a special someone?"

"She thinks she just broke up with her girlfriend," said Charlie, helpfully.

“Thinks?”

“Urgh, I don’t know,” said Frankie, kicking a fallen branch out of the path. “I don’t understand her sometimes. She’s so calm all the time.”

“I like calm,” said Charlie.

“Sure, but she’s totally unbothered.”

“You want her to be bothered?” The white in Elena’s wings caught the bike’s front light.

“I don’t know! I guess? I’d like her to react to things sometimes!”

They crossed a bridge over the River Kelvin. Ponderous statues sat on either end, folds of cast-iron fabric draped around their feet. Cora had used this bridge in an art project last year, painted herself grey and posed among the statues while Frankie took photos. There had been grey streaks around her bathtub for weeks.

“What do you want her to react to, babe?”

Frankie thought about the fight at the restaurant. How she’d flirted with the waitress with the art-school mullet to antagonise Cora, and then got upset when her girlfriend didn’t take the bait. She shook her head.

*

Over the bridge, the smell of weed drifted towards them from a couple of guys smoking on a bench. Charlie perked up, but Frankie and Elena drew away, Frankie feeling in her pocket for the sturdy key to her flat’s backcourt and gripping it in her fist. The men ignored them and Frankie turned, relieved, onto an avenue of sprawling horse chestnut trees. She was about to scold Elena for making her paranoid about the park when something scuttled, loud and sudden, above their heads. Frankie yelped and Elena took flight in a noisy flapping of wings. A squirrel ran into view across a low branch, shaking loose leaves onto the path.

“Francesca?” the squirrel chattered. “Is that you? It’s me, Safiye.”

“Oh, it’s another one!” said Elena, “Come and join us Miss Squirrel, where do you sit in the pantheon of exes?”

“Oh no, I’m not—” said the squirrel.

“She’s not—” said Frankie. The squirrel dropped to the path in front of the bike. Frankie swerved around her and kept going, calling over her shoulder.

“Safiye, hi! How are you? It’s been a while!”

Safiye scurried along the tarmac.

“Yeah, I’m not bad, keeping busy. I live in Leeds now, working at a publishing company—um, I don’t understand what’s happening?”

“None of us do, love,” said Elena. “We think the universe might be a hologram? Hey, Frankie—where’s your manners? Let—what was your name? Safiye? Such a pretty name! Let Safiye hop up on your whatsit.”

Reluctantly, Frankie let Safiye climb onto the bike rack. Elena perched beside her.

“So, not an ex?” said Elena.

“No. We were friends back in school.”

“Yep, we were school friends,” said Frankie. “Ages ago. Years and years ago.”

“Right...” Elena leaned closer to Safiye. “It’s okay. You can tell us the truth. Did Frankie dump you, too? Friend dump you?”

Frankie pinged the bike bell. “Elena! Butt out!”

“She’s in a bad mood,” stage-whispered the magpie.

They were back on the road now, a streetlamp-lined avenue bisecting the park. Charlie darted ahead to the minced remains of a pigeon—just feathers jutting out of tire-flattened pink mulch. Elena left Safiye’s side and flapped over to have a peck.

“I’m going to be sick,” said Frankie.

Charlie looked at her with a blood-flecked snout. “When in Rome,” he said.

“We’re animals, babe!” Elena’s voice was muffled by a beakful of carrion.

Sour bile rose in Frankie’s throat and she marched the bike past them. Their bickering voices followed her, tussling over the meat. As she crossed the street at the edge of the park, snuffling gulps came from the bike rack.

“Hey, it’s okay...” said Frankie.

“Is it? I was in Marbella!” said Safiye.

“That sounds nice?”

“It was nice! I was a bridesmaid! We went paddle-boarding!” Safiye swallowed hard. “And now I’m a squirrel in a strange park with...”

“With me, yeah. Sorry.”

Safiye snorted an unhappy laugh. “If you’re apologising to me, I really must be dreaming.”

Frankie didn’t know what to say. She was relieved when Charlie and Elena caught up to the bike at the lights, Elena giggling at Charlie’s attempts to remove burs from his fur with his teeth.

Frankie turned onto Argyle Street, and they passed a bar with a dark wood interior where she and Elena had once spent half a paycheck on French Martinis.

“Now that was a good night,” said Elena, nodding towards it before settling back on the bike rack next to Safiye.

“You alright there, love?” she said. “You seem too nice a girl to be mixed up with Frankie.”

“Are you actually flirting with her right now?” said Frankie.

“I’m not flirting. I’m showing basic human compassion, you asshole!” Elena spat something from her beak that hit Frankie’s back. Elena yelped. Charlie snickered.

Safiye’s voice was quiet.

“You were right, Elena. Me and Francesca—Frankie, we were best friends ‘til year nine. Then she just dumped me. It really hurt my feelings, if I’m honest.”

Frankie turned round to look at Safiye. Elena had a wing around her small grey body. “I’m sorry, yeah?” Frankie said. “I was a jerk.”

On the other side of the road, a woman in a dressing gown taking her dog out stared at their odd procession.

“Mm,” said Safiye. “Do I want to know why you did it? I probably shouldn’t ask.”

Frankie gripped the handlebars tight. “I was kind of hoping you wouldn’t.” She took a breath and pulled the words from deep in her body.

“I had feelings for you, okay? Typical crush on straight best friend stuff, though at the time it felt—anyway... You weren’t interested, and I was freaked out by how I felt, so I just thought it’d be simpler to start over.” Frankie stared ahead, concentrated on the bike pedals ticking over.

“Oh!” said Safiye, “I had no idea!”

“Really?”

“No! I mean, I guess looking back... but you know you could have said something, Frankie? Like, my brother’s gay. I wouldn’t have told anyone—”

“I know. I wanted to say something later, but it was like, ‘She hates me now.’”

Frankie weaved the bike through the barriers and into the overpass crossing the motorway, its plexiglass sides opaque with the scratched remains of layers of advertising.

“Well, I appreciate you saying it now. Even if... you know, none of this is really real.”

“Even dreams are real, in a way,” said Elena.

“Truth.” Charlie extended a paw and Elena bumped it with her wing. “While we’re clearing the air— Charlie, is there anything you want to say to the woman of the hour?”

The fox padded along in thought for a moment.

“It doesn’t keep me up at night,” he said, “but I do sometimes wonder if you ever went on that backpacking trip.”

Frankie groaned. “Oh God, okay.” She recited the story in a sing-song: “I flew to Santiago, got a full twenty-four hours in there before a friend back home confessed their love for me and I flew back and blew the rest of the money on cheap vodka and takeaway.”

Charlie barked a laugh and Frankie smiled a reluctant smile. The bike chain clicked as they descended the concrete slope of the overpass. “I am a fucking mess, right enough,” Frankie said.

They cut behind the hotel where Frankie had accompanied Cora to her cousin’s wedding. The smell of the fir trees reminded her of the two of them escaping outside for a smoke and a whinge when the acoustic Ed Sheeran covers had become too much. What was Cora doing now? Crying on the phone to her sister? Cursing Frankie in her journal? Probably just sleeping, Frankie decided, still and unbothered.

“I want my turn,” said Elena.

She perched between the handlebars and faced Frankie, her iridescent blue-green feathers glistening under the streetlamp.

“You broke my heart, obviously.”

“I know,” said Frankie.

“But I gave you a lot of hassle.” Elena twitched her tail feathers. “And you probably didn’t deserve all of it.”

“Kind of you to say.”

The bike vibrated as Frankie wheeled it over a patch of cobblestones.

“Maybe it’s just the romantic setting,” said Elena, as they passed the industrial wheelie bins at the back of the hotel, “but I’m feeling nostalgic tonight. I do wish it had ended better between us.” The tip of her wing brushed Frankie’s hand.

“Me too,” said Frankie.

*

They were at the edge of the Clyde and Frankie walked the bike along the riverside. A cool breeze blew off the water that filled her nostrils with the vegetal smell of river mud. As the beam of the headlamp shone on the railings, it spotlighted fat spiders hanging in webs between the struts. Normally, Frankie would have recoiled, but tonight she felt a strange tenderness towards them; the spiders could have their moment, too.

They crossed the metal span of the footbridge—Elena perched on the handlebars, Safiye on the bike rack, and Charlie trotting close to Frankie’s legs. The girl, the fox, the magpie, and the squirrel were held together for an instant at the peak of the bridge as if they were one creature of tails, wings, limbs, and wheels. Across the Clyde, the criss-cross girders of the vast shipbuilding crane and the silver arc of the Squinty Bridge stood out against the sky. Then, the moment passed, and Frankie reached a stop on the other side. The animals and the girl looked at one another, and Charlie nodded.

“Well, I think that’s my purpose fulfilled,” he said. “Later, guys. It’s been a good trip.”

“I’m off, too,” said Safiye. “Um. I’m glad we could talk.”

The fox and the squirrel disappeared into the winding paths of the Science Centre garden and Elena waved them goodbye with a wing. Frankie held out a hand to stroke the magpie's sleek head. She didn't move away.

"D'you think we could be friends, despite it all?" she said.

Elena stretched her black-tipped wings. "Well, if tonight's shown me anything it's that we're part of each other's lives whether we like it or not." She rubbed her head into Frankie's hand. "But I think I could grow to like it." Elena took flight, and Frankie watched until she was hidden by the dark outlines of the trees.

At the riverside, a black-headed gull flapped onto a bench. Frankie propped the bike next to it and sat down.

"I've been a dick to you," she said.

"Yes," said Cora.

"I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't think you should, really. But I am sorry." Cora looked at her with round black pupils ringed in white.

"I feel like you want something from me," she said, "but I don't know what it is."

Frankie dropped forward on her forearms and talked to the river.

"I want you to be passionate about me. I want you to care if I stay or go. I want to feel that I'm worth fighting for." She blinked, and the lights from the buildings blurred, coloured ink dropped in water.

Cora pecked at her feathers with a curved red beak. "Jealousy isn't the same as passion. You know that, right? Because if we do try this again it's really important that you know that."

"Yeah. I know."

"Okay then." Cora sat down, settling into the bench. They sat without speaking for a moment.

“You’re taking this whole animal thing very well,” said Frankie, waving a hand towards her. She rubbed the lump forming on her shin. It felt like an age since she had fallen off her bike on Great Western Road.

“Elena thinks I manifested this. She’s gone all woo because her new girlfriend’s a tarot reader. I don’t know. Maybe we should go for a drink with them some time. If you want.”

The gull squawked, loud and startling.

“Cora?”

The bird tipped its head towards her and chattered, and Frankie realised it was no longer Cora, just an ordinary black-headed gull. It hunched its neck into its body, chirped and hopped off the bench to join its fellow.

“Oh,” said Frankie. She watched the two gulls flap and squawk away across the river.

*

Frankie took out her phone, then put it away again. She looked at her palms, calloused from bike-riding. She looked at the deflated back tire of her bike. Across Glasgow, foxes trotted down quiet streets, magpies perched on drainpipes, and squirrels scaled pebbledash flats. For a moment, Frankie felt the presence of all the creatures in the city, as if they were held together in one web. Then she gave the river a salute, picked up her bike, and pointed it south. The universe would need to save any further revelations for another night. Frankie was going home.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Twinkle, a young writer from India, has loved reading for more years than she's loved anything else. In the past, she has published a short story in an anthology. After being driven crazy by a hectic year at college, she has returned to writing.

Things That Move

by Twinkle M

Motion. The act of moving. Spinning, sprinting, sliding. *If a body is moving at a constant speed, it will keep moving unless acted upon by a force.* The rhythm of legs, air currents from a bird's flapping wings. Blood flowing through veins, atoms clashing constantly, electrons orbiting in relentless circles, or near-circles... everything moving, all the time.

All the time.

A disorder of visual perception, most probably of the higher areas of the visual cortex—the first diagnosis. Or maybe some issue with the cerebellum—because there wasn't any distinctive sound or scent, so how could they be sure those senses remained unaffected? An association cortex syndrome? Something to do with perception and the sensory system, most likely, because the defect was in the *perception* of motion, not in the *act* of it, right?

"What could you tell from the scans?" his mother asked, hovering over him—literally and figuratively—as she did. She no longer bothered to make him leave before starting the discussion.

“Nothing much, to be honest,” replied the doctor, his eyes flicking to the scans before him. “Activation in too many parts, like before. Some temporal difference, but nothing very significant. Or useful.”

“Okay, so where do we go from here?”

His mother had learned the language well. With unconventional illnesses, the trick was not to ask “What’s the solution?”, because no one knew that. Rather, you asked what came next: new treatment, method, experiment. The latest had been to scan his brain while they put him in a virtual walking stimulation—to reduce activation from his moving parts or something—but too much of his brain had lighted up anyway.

“Well, you’ll have to give us some time. We were kind of hoping this would do the trick, you know.” His mother’s face tightened—he’d never imagined having an active brain could be a disappointment—and the doctor rushed to add, “But we’ll figure something out. Don’t worry.”

That was his cue to leave. He could’ve left way before—the discussion was *about* him, not *for* him—but he liked to know what new thing they were going to try.

“Mom, I’m going outside.”

She nodded and ruffled his hair before he took off. His worn boots hardly made a sound as he jogged down the hallway. Over the years, he had become an expert at running nearly silently. As he gained speed, the world slowed down. Walls stopped drifting, floors ceased sliding, and the sky outside the shuttered windows became still. He descended the stairs two at a time, sprinted out, and nearly jumped onto the swing. Sometimes, if he was fast enough, he almost didn’t notice the transition.

“Hey, watch out.”

He skittered to a stop, the pebbles making a jarring sound as his boots dug into them. A boy sat on the swing next to his, crocs planted firmly on the ground, like he had no intention to swing.

“I’m sorry, did I hit you? I didn’t mean to.”

“No. But this is kind of like my time, you know.”

“Your time?” He blinked, trying to see through the momentary haze between motion and stopping. Did the hospital playground have different shifts or something?

“Yeah. My time to sit-on-the-swing-and-feel-sorry-for-myself. I wish someone was recording; I’d look great as the moody, sarcastic lead.”

Was he hearing wrong? That had happened before—sometimes, if he came to an abrupt stop, his senses took time to work right. They’d never transmitted something *that* strange before, though.

“Anyway, I’m Matt. And you—”

“Cary.”

Matt’s eyebrows furrowed. Now that he had been still for a while, he could make out his companion better: Matt seemed about his age, but that was all the similarity they had. He was like a washed out-sheet: alabaster pale, with light brown hair and faded blue eyes. Matt, on the other hand, had a sharp brown complexion with dark black hair. His eyes, though, were the kind of startling blue that always looked surprised.

“Cary what?”

“No, I’m Cary. Short for Charles.”

Cary prepared himself for the usual interrogation about the abbreviation, but it didn’t come.

“Cool. What’re you here for?”

“Just to swing for a while.”

“Not the playground, idiot, the hospital. Why are you at the hospital?”

Of course. Why would anyone ask why someone was at the playground?

“Sorry. Uh, I’m here because there’s something wrong with my head. It seems to me like the world is always moving.”

Matt whistled. “That’s a new one. So, like, right now, you see me moving? How? Like, back-and-forth or up-and-down or what?”

“Uh, it varies, actually. Right now it’s like if you were rocking.”

“Cool. And it never stops?”

“Only if I’m moving. Like when I ran here.”

“Interesting. If you move, the world doesn’t, but if you stop, it does?”

Cary nodded.

“Crazy.”

Normally, that would’ve bothered, or hurt, Cary, depending on how it was said. Some people muttered it under their breaths, like an insult, while others whispered it involuntarily, like they pitied him. Matt said it with awe, like something that was surprising and new, but not freakish or anything like that.

“What’re you here for?”

“I’m not answering that,” Matt said, without missing a beat. He jumped up from the swing. “You try and figure it out as we go along.”

“Go along where?”

“Just scouting. Something interesting always turns up, if you keep looking for it, even in a psychiatric hospital’s playground. Besides, we’re ideal partners: your world is the most stable when you’re moving, and everyone says I love moving around too much for my own good.”

He motioned for Cary to follow. Cary was half-inclined to deny, but what was the point? He didn’t have anything better to do. Besides, Matt was the first kid he’d

talked to in a long time; dropping out of school and spending all of his time around his mother and doctor, with no skill to approach strangers didn't make for a very friendly mixture.

"Who else do you know around here?"

"Uh, no one."

"No one? You don't come here often?"

"I live here."

"Really? Then why don't you know the other kids? It's a shared space."

"I live in one of the quarters with my mother."

"Oh, right."

Cary strived to detect any underlying sarcasm, but he was either too pleased to be talking to someone new, or there really wasn't any. Plucking up his courage, he asked, "Do you know the other kids?"

"Some of them. There's Alicia, sixteen, OCD. Rita, fifteen, anorexia. Michael, eleven, ADHD. And Steve, fourteen—my age—autism. I could introduce you; Steve takes some time with strangers, but the rest are pretty okay."

Cary made some non-committal noise. The prospect of talking to so many new kids, even if they were all around his age (fourteen) was too daunting.

"We'll do that another day," he continued. They were walking at a brisk pace, yet, Cary could feel the not-quite stillness of the world. But he didn't speed up. "Today, we gotta steal pies."

"Steal pies?"

"Yeah. If you sneak in through a window and pick some from the boxes and slip them out, no one notices. I could do it alone, but it's better to have a partner to

catch them outside. All pies are good, but not having to remove the grass from them is better.”

“But why would you do that?”

“Because I can’t eat grass, Cary.”

“No—why would you steal the pies?”

“Oh, that. You see, the pies are only for the richer kids. Not the hospital’s fault—something to do with funding—that’s what everyone says, anyway. But I’d like for my friends to have some pies today. We only do it once a week.”

“But—”

“What? Would you rather we didn’t have pies even once? When they have it every alternate day?”

Well, that made it difficult to argue.

Also—who was he kidding? He hadn’t had a friend in years, and Matt was here, ready to talk to, ready to walk with him at a speed that almost made everything all right, and if he wanted to steal some pies, Cary wasn’t going to say no.

“Right, okay.”

“Awesome,” Matt said, grinning.

Matt picked up the pace—which was fine with Cary. As they jogged down the slope, Cary hardly noticed the transition. Half his mind was lost in thought about Matt, the other busy observing him. What was he? ADHD? He had the restlessness and impulsivity, but was that enough? He ran with a focus, without getting distracted, but maybe that didn’t happen... Or he had cleverly disguised depression. Or mania. Or something he probably hadn’t heard of yet.

“There it is.”

A flat white structure stood before them, its windows reflecting the clouds. It was better than a shed, but not much. Matt pawed towards it, Cary following. The white walls were moving, like someone had hit play on a video, and the clouds looked like they were drifting. Cary focused on Matt's back—striding forward confidently—and his own motion combined with perceiving Matt's lessened the dizziness.

"I'll go in. You squat by the window. I'll pass the pies. Just rap once if you see anyone coming."

Cary nodded. Matt clapped his arm once, leaving a pleasant vibration in his wake, and jumped inside. Cary crouched, trying not to look down and see the ground moving. Watching out for a moving person in a moving world was like looking for driftwood in a stormy sea.

"Aha! Chocolate, my favorite!" Cary grinned at Matt's voice, and began shoving the pies in a paper bag. "So," he continued, still digging for pies, "have you figured out why I'm here yet?"

"No. I'm hoping it isn't psychopathy, though."

Matt chuckled, and Cary felt a burst of warmth in his chest.

"Nah. But aren't you curious?"

"Not really. I don't care what brought you here." I'm just glad we became friends, he wanted to add. It was true. He'd been trying to diagnose Matt earlier, but that was just idle thinking. He didn't care what Matt had. As long as he was friendly and nice and laughing, what did it matter?

He instinctively held out his hand for the next pie, but didn't receive it. Were they done? He looked in, but Matt seemed hazy, blurred, which meant he'd gone still. He was staring at Cary, staring with a peculiar look, something Cary couldn't puzzle out.

"I didn't mean—I mean, I wasn't saying I don't *care*—"

The lock at the door started turning. Cary wrenched his hand back and swiveled around: an old man was keying the lock, just about to open it.

“Damn it!” Cary muttered, but Matt was too fast. He jumped out the window just as the door fell open. The old man let out a scream of surprise but Matt didn’t turn. He grabbed Cary’s hand and tugged, and before he knew what was happening, they were running across the grounds. The speed was blinding, exhilarating—so fast Cary felt the world slow to stillness. He looked down. One hand was clutching the bag of pies, the other clamped hard in Matt’s. A bit too hard; maybe Matt was worried he would fall behind or slip or something.

They skidded to a stop and promptly fell to the ground. Cary tried to sit up, but Matt’s hand held him back. He turned and saw Matt curled against the grass, breathing heavily.

“Matt, I’m so sorry. I should’ve seen him. I wasn’t paying attention, I—”

“Sorry?” Matt interrupted, speaking through rattling breaths. “Are you crazy, Cary? That was the best fricking thing I did all day.”

He was grinning. Like, actually grinning, the kind of grin that takes up your whole face and makes you look kinda crazy. And suddenly, Cary was grinning too, and then they were both laughing, shaking with peals of laughter though he couldn’t have told you why.

“Earlier, in the shed,” Matt began, as their laughs started to die away. “When you said you didn’t care—”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Cary said quickly. “I meant it didn’t matter to me to know. Not like your problem doesn’t matter.”

“I figured,” replied Matt quietly. “And that’s... sometimes, I think, people care too much about the problem, even when they’re trying to help. It’s like the first thing they ask about you, especially around here. It starts to feel like it defines people, like your problem *is* you, not a part of you. So I really liked that you didn’t care.”

“I hadn’t—I didn’t know people did that.”

“Well, you’ve hardly talked to anyone here.”

“I... I don’t approach them because I think they won’t like me,” Cary admitted, his voice quiet. “My problem’s too alien. Too weird. Sometimes I think I would be better off blind.”

Matt was a silent for a minute. Then, “Remember back when I said we were stealing those pies because they were only for the rich kids and stuff?” Cary nodded. “I lied. I didn’t want to go steal the pies alone, but I could see you weren’t coming otherwise. I just wanted to do it for the fun. You didn’t. That made us different. But there were things that made us alike, especially how we both just want to keep moving. And I focused on that. If you focus on the similarities, the differences don’t matter as much.”

Cary looked at Matt, and tried, as hard as he could, to stop his face from drifting, to keep his image still. He couldn’t—and probably would never be able to. But Matt’s hand in his felt steady as a rock, and he decided to take his advice and focus on that.

“Now, before you think I’m some arrogant jerk trying to be all mature, let’s eat those pies. You’ll eat, right?”

Cary grinned, nodded.

“Was it always like this?” Matt asked, munching on his second pie. “The motion thing?”

“Yeah,” answered Cary, nibbling at his. “As long as I can remember. Honestly, I wouldn’t have much of a problem with it, if not for the other things. Like if I try to focus to read or something, I get this huge headache. It’s also very difficult to talk to people. Because I constantly have to shift attention, and that comes across as weird.”

“And you wouldn’t tell them the real reason.”

“I realize now that I should have.”

Matt nodded, staring at his half-eaten pie.

“Cary?”

Cary looked at the ground. It was moving. So was the pie, Matt’s hand, shoulder, and face. But when his gaze reached his eyes, Cary forced himself to focus, ignoring the sharp pain shooting down his skull. He felt he needed to focus, to pay real attention to whatever Matt was about to say.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not gonna come back tomorrow. This is my last day here.”

Cary felt surprised, shocked, sad. He wanted to think Matt was joking, but he didn’t sound remotely like it.

“Does that mean you’re cured?” He asked, hoping to inject something positive in the suddenly heavy conversation.

“Well, there’s nothing more the hospital can do,” Matt said. It wasn’t a real answer, but Cary let it pass.

“You’ll be going home?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure I’ll stay there. Anyway, that’s not why I told you.”

Steady, Cary told himself. Don’t let him waver.

“No?”

“I knew this was my last day here, and I didn’t want to go through with the routine. You know, the way last days give you the freedom to break routines, because there’s no tomorrow to worry about? I wanted to do something different, something fun. What I’m trying to say is, you helped me do that. I had a great last day with you, Cary.”

Cary felt weird. Like the world was still but something was moving inside him, a way he never had felt before. No one had ever said something like that to him. Then again, it wasn’t the kind of thing a lot of normal people would say to other normal people. But who cared what was normal anyway?

“Thanks.” Then, to dissipate the awkwardness he was feeling—*Matt* looked perfectly at ease—asked, “So, if it’s your last day, aren’t you going to introduce me to those kids before leaving?”

Matt shook his head.

“No, you’ll do that yourself, after I’ve left.”

It would sound rude to someone listening, but Cary knew it wasn’t. It was a way of saying how the day had changed him: he need no longer be afraid of being judged or thought weird. If someone couldn’t accept the way he’d been born, that was their problem, not his. And if Matt was any proof, he wasn’t entirely unlikeable, as he’d always assumed.

“It’s almost six,” Matt continued, glancing at his watch. “I gotta go. My parents must be at the gates already.”

He waved, and Cary waved back. He had almost turned the corner of the sliding wall when Cary came to a stop beside him. Before he could start to have second thoughts, he threw his arms around him. Matt, startled, took a minute to respond, but soon he was returning the hug, his gangly arms wrapping around Cary’s skinny frame.

“Just wanted you to know, that I had a great first day. Thanks, Matt, and have a good journey.”

*

Matt Reiner first came to the East County Mental Hospital for Children when thirteen, but he’d been sick before that. He had his first stroke at eleven. After a fitful year at school culminated in a second mini-stroke, he was withdrawn. Since then, he’d spent moving from hospital to hospital. It took a year and a half just to diagnose him accurately, and that was before the experiments/treatments began.

It seemed like he had inherited a vulnerability to stroke. Still, having it so young was unusual. Besides, kids don’t have as much to stress them out and set off a stroke. In Matt’s case, however, that didn’t seem to matter.

Ever since the second stroke, they'd lived in frightful anticipation of a third—one most likely to end either in paralysis or death. They'd done their best, put him on the most suitable medication. He'd been sent to East County to spend some months under observation. There hadn't been a stroke, but the most hopeful doctors predicted that it could only be delayed, not prevented, and that not by much. Three years, at best.

Cary learnt all this the very next day. Some from the doctor, some from files he'd riffled through, and some from the other kids. It made him sad, sure, but more than that, it made him angry. Not at Matt, for not telling him—he would've pitied, and no one wanted that. No, he was angry, but at nothing in particular. The world, maybe. That there were kids like Matt and the others here whose brains were set on killing them. That there was nothing he, or anyone else he knew, could do about that.

"I understand that," his mother said, when he told her, watching as the hair that had escaped her bun flew with the wind, while her head itself looked like it was moving back and forth. "And I'm really sorry about it all too. But I'm glad you both met."

"Yeah, I would never have talked to anyone if not for him."

"That, and also because it does sound like you were just what he needed. Someone who wanted to move as much as him, and didn't pry. Good fits."

Cary smiled. It hurt—hurt a lot—to think of that. To know what good friends they could've been, if there'd been more time. But some time was better than no time, and he was glad for it. When he stepped out of his room to head to the dining hall and jogged the way, he watched as the world transitioned from moving to still to moving again, and didn't feel like he'd be better off blind anymore.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Ian Salavon is a husband, father of four, professional chef by trade and spends much of his free time volunteering at his judo club in Fort Worth, TX where he is a black belt and coach. His work is featured in his family's bedtime stories and long road trips. This story is Ian's first published piece of fiction.

Move Eat Repeat

by Ian Salavon

We had to keep moving. We didn't have a choice. The smell compelled us like a cartoon pie on a windowsill, the steam penetrating our nostrils and pulling us. And we kept walking to it. We say walking, but we were shambling, shuffling. Not exactly walking but moving all the same. We averaged about a half a mile an hour, and when something got in our way, like a lake or a fence, it only slowed us. Once, we walked to a cliff and kept going. Those of us in front provided cushion for those of us that followed when we fell. We suffered broken bones and lost limbs, but we kept moving. We that couldn't walk anymore pulled ourselves with our arms. Obstacles were annoyances to be sure. But we eventually overcame them, and we kept moving on course to the smell.

All the stories got it wrong, sort of. On the outside, we were mindless lumbering corpses. But we could still think and feel and want. We just couldn't act on it. We were like thought cloud passengers riding our bodies for, well, we didn't know for how long or why. We just kept going. We couldn't communicate with us. We were of one purpose, but our minds were separate. But we followed that delectable smell.

Maybe we had smelled it before. It was like the smell of ideas and thought and life. Come to think of it, we couldn't smell anything else. But we didn't stop limping our way to our end goal. Moving was more than instinct. It was religion and philosophy. Moving to the smell was existence.

We didn't feel pain anymore. We were missing body parts. Bone and muscle were exposed to the elements. When it rained, tattered flesh sloughed off. When it was dry, scorched skin flaked into the wind like sand. Eyes were gone, but we could still see. Organs were destroyed but we could still move regardless of the damage.

We got waylaid by them once. We don't think they knew what to do. They thought they could ambush us with rifles, but their smell drew us in. They couldn't hide. That's when we got our first taste. We tried to say the word for the meat inside their head. Nothing but a gravelly rasp came out. We were thinking it as we ate the candy-like insides of their skulls. We all wanted more. So, when we were done with them, we caught another scent and kept walking. Move. Eat. Repeat.

Once, we had a family, a career, and even a dog. Who knew where they were now? We had children. They were smart and talented. Our spouse was beautiful and kind. We had what we would call a charmed life, but just because we could remember the details of our other selves doesn't mean we wanted it all back. This was simple. No stress. No obstruction. Just single-minded intention. We thought it ironic that if we had this kind of focus before, we might have made more of ourselves. But, like we said before, who cares?

It was rare, but every now and then, one of them would recognize us. We could hear the pain in their voice: "Daddy, please!" or "Oh my god, Mary!" Inevitably another would say, "They're gone, now! It's not them anymore." But they didn't know. We were still in here. We just weren't on the surface. We couldn't be reached. No matter what they said, and no matter how hard we tried to stop, we moved to that smell and ate. It didn't make any difference who it was. We ate and we kept on going and ate some more. And we felt the loss. We felt the guilt and the shame. We felt all the disgust, and we wished the worst on ourselves for actions we couldn't control. And then we moved on in our slow half-stomping, half-shuffling way looking for more. Following the smell. We kept moving.

It grew stronger as we moved south. The stronger the smell, the more of them there were. It was hot. We think it was July, and if we were paying attention we probably would have known where we were. Our minds wandered a lot. With no rest (we never stopped) and no sleep (we didn't need it), we tended to think about anything while our bodies did what they did: move to the smell. We thought about the future, and we laughed. Nothing but a dry hiss came out. There would come a time when we couldn't move.

If moving was the all-encompassing reason for our being here, what would happen when the moving went away? The idea of not moving, of not being able to follow the smell, the thought almost made us short circuit. It just didn't make sense. We wondered if this is what we had in mind when we used to talk about unity before. If we took away what we were doing, isn't this what we wanted? All of us moving together toward one goal. Granted, that goal was to eat them, but we don't need to split hairs.

Of course, with the way things were now, the same could be said for them. They were united in stopping us. We used to think that fighting against all odds, even when facing Armageddon, was the noblest act we could do. Now, that just seems like gibberish. We would win. We were unstoppable. We kept going no matter what. The poor, mouthwatering fools they were.

It was hard to miss the giant wall they constructed on the outside of the city. We recognized the skyline even in ruins. It was on the coast. We were right. We had been moving south, and we'd been moving for a long time, but that didn't matter. Day became night became day ad infinitum, and we were still miles from the city. The walls were enormous, at least as tall as the great buildings behind it in some places. Even from this far away, we could see the piecemeal work of the walls' construction. Junked automobiles, shipping containers, and train cars provided the foundation for reams of iron rebar, concrete pillars, old scaffolding, and I-beams. They used anything to build the strongest barrier they could, and it wouldn't stop us. We would get through and have our fill. We always did.

The sun went down and came up and we kept moving. It was harder now because there were so many of us packed together. Those of us in the front kept pushing,

but the wall held. The hoard kept trying to move forward. The smell made us drunk with lust for the flavor of what they held inside for us. We were coming.

On the sixth day after we were forced to stop moving due to the wall doing its temporary job, they started trying to burn us. They sent out helicopters and dropped fuel on us then lit us on fire. They only succeeded in making putrefied cadavers burnt. We kept on pushing. We could hear some of the shouting on the other side of the wall: "Evacuate the city?" they asked. "We have to make a stand" they said back. They were so stupid. Were we that stupid before? Probably. We had deliberate design now, and nothing would get in the way. Nothing could.

The wall began to fall after weeks of battering our decayed bodies against it. There was a layer of us that had been stomped flat by then, mashed into the ground by our incessant moving. We stood on our writhing corpses still pounding into the wall as it fell. Tons of debris crushed us. We kept going. Explosions flayed us apart. We kept going. We made it to the opening and had the pleasure of watching them flee or fight. Both were useless gestures. If they fought, they'd be eaten and become us. If they fled, we'd catch them, eat them, and they'd become us.

The smell was overpowering. Our memories in our cloud minds were a haze inside the cloying stink that called us. They were tired from trying to keep us out for so long. We never tired. Some of them resigned themselves to their fate either out of wisdom in accepting the inevitable or in sacrifice to let some escape. We came like locusts. We left nothing in our wake except the reawakened. They joined us in the feast. We ate until our bellies were distended, and we kept on eating even with stomachs full and grey matter stuffed into our rotting esophagi. We ate until their brains fell from our mouths onto the streets of the city. Then we picked them up and ate some more.

When everything was gone, the smell went away. We walked the streets and our cloud minds returned. Our lives from before were clear again, but we had no power over what was left of us. We moved with no function, no purpose. We were afraid, if fear was something we felt. The city held nothing for us, but we moved through it like thousands of macabre Oliver Twists. "Please, Sir. May I have some more?" We screamed ourselves into silent madness. Hoping for a direction. Praying to follow the smell of our reason for being one more time. It was oblivion,

recognizing everything and being impotent to all of it. Existence not even for its own sake. We were less than dead.

Time passed. Thoughts blurred. Nothing we'd seen from before registered. One day mashed into another. Memories did the same. We started to fall apart faster. We were still moving, but very slowly. Bones were brittle and cracked easily. We couldn't turn our head anymore, and the bottom part of our jaw had fallen off. We wouldn't let that stop us from eating again if we got the chance.

There was a terrible storm. Wind and rain pummeled us, and water from the shoreline flooded the streets. The torrents threw us this way and that. Nothing more than a curious distraction. Buildings collapsed on us, and over time we dug ourselves out. We never stopped moving. The waters receded and flushed us into the gulf. Waterlogged, we rose from the beaches on a clear bright morning, and it hit us. The smell, sweet and pungent and already intoxicating. We looked to the southern horizon and saw large ships far off in the gulf. We recognized them as war ships from before.

They were on those ships, waiting for us to seize and eat them and have them join us and keep going. We were nothing but a skeleton with a few bits of soggy meat pieces now as we waded out into the surf that gently splashed against our boney legs. It was our army vs their army. They had weapons that couldn't stop us. And they had that delicious and disgusting smell.

And we kept moving to them. They couldn't stop us.

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GUEST WRITER

Sarah says, "I have been writing as a hobby since my childhood and particularly when I lived in London, England for seven years. It was here that I was inspired to write a story set on an underground train. The journey from Cockfosters station to Heathrow Airport is the setting of this story, hence the title. Someday I'd love to flesh it out and turn it into a short play (the journey is 90 minutes, after all)."

Cockfosters

by Sarah Moraghan

Terry is waiting on the platform, all the fingernails of one hand between his teeth. Minutes seem to pass before the train's doors slide open. Seconds, in fact.

He ducks into the tube and perches on the seat closest to him.

"This is... Cockfosters. This is a Piccadilly Line service to... Heathrow Terminals 1, 2, 3 and 5."

Thirty-seven more announcements will accompany him on his journey. His ninety-minute ride to the end of the line. Just him and the robot lady with her honeyed, noble tones.

Listen to the sound of her voice. Relax...

He leans his elbows on his thighs, spreads his fingers to his hairline. His heel is tap-tap-tapping on the carriage floor.

The train waits a few minutes, as it always does. Hours.

He looks up and around him. He is the only person in the carriage. He hopes nobody he knows gets on before he leaves.

Come on. Come on.

A mild rumble and a hiss; another train pulling into the opposite platform. Terry curses under his breath.

Then, a frantic *beep-beep-beep-beep-beep* serenades his ears as the carriage doors whoosh shut. The train cranks awake, takes a breath. Terry exhales as it begins to trundle away.

“The next station is... Oakwood.”

It's approaching eight in the morning. A quiet Sunday in mid-January. A city in the throes of Father Christmas's persistent hangover. The train hasn't gone underground just as the sun hasn't yet peeped over, but Terry expects the two to swap places simultaneously. Darkness will shroud him in anonymity all the way down into London's underbelly.

Plus, he reckons he's the only person on the entire tube.

Or is he?

Paranoia tickles him. He's in the rearmost carriage. But did he spot somebody else getting in at the front end, in the distance? He's not sure. At forty-eight years old, his eyesight has already begun to fail him. One of the body's signs it has stopped growing up towards its prime, and is now starting its slow, gradual journey towards eventual death.

He scratches murky thoughts with a shake of his head. Tells his mind to shut it and be grateful he's okay. Grateful he's getting away from here. Starting afresh.

Nothing left for you here.

Memories try to slither tiny fingers through the fissures of his brain. Blonde hair tumbling. Blue eyes flashing. White dress. Gilded garter. Doctor's office with reproductive charts on the walls.

Terry groans. Digs the heel of one hand into his eye socket.

The train always screeches when it picks up speed. What on earth makes that godawful howling noise, anyway? He never thought about it until now. Sounds like a thousand despairing souls swirling into the infernal eternal.

Annoying little sprites in his brain. Blonde hair on the pillow. Pretty blue eyes shut in the dead of night. Too late for pillow talk, again. Bumped knee on the nightstand. *Ouch.*

Both heels of his hands in both eye sockets now.

Think about what's in front of you.

Cloudy windows. Grey floor. Patterned blue seats, faded by light and prints of hundreds of millions of arses over the years. Heathrow Airport; center of the earth.

Blue poles. Yellow poles. Yellow hair. Blue eyes; open now. Not meeting yours anymore though, are they. Looking over your shoulder.

Look.

“Fuck off!” Terry snarls.

The tube doors are open. A random bloke, about to step on, backs away and slips sideways into the next carriage.

“This is... Oakwood. This is a Piccadilly Line service....”

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep...

Terry is embarrassed. He rests his elbow on his knee. Peers through his fingers like venetian blinds.

“The next station is... Southgate.”

Distorted silhouettes of dreary scenes whizz by outside. That's why some people get motion sickness, Terry muses. Blurred vision. Body thinks it's being poisoned.

Still an empty carriage. Privacy and safety in this cozy vessel of his.

But Terry isn't far enough away from home to rest. Not yet. He has lived in the borough of Enfield his whole life. His immigrant Turkish grandparents raised his father in Enfield. His father met his immigrant Irish mother in Enfield. Terry met his English wife in Enfield, in the suburb of Cockfosters.

He sighs. The home he just left. His penchant for socializing ensures he knows everyone, or at least far too many people, in the area. He needs to keep his head down, down until he reaches central London, enters town.

He swoops across a bridge. A tunnel approaches, but it's not the *real* tunnel. Just a warm up, a friendly. Terry lets his eyelids droop in meditation as its mouth yawns around him. The wails of the thousand souls dwindle into silence.

Deep breaths.

Yoga class with his wife. Her cute little arse in the air.

"This is... Southgate."

He senses one person embark the carriage. He assures himself of the low chance he will meet anybody he knows at this hour.

"Didn't see you there, Tel!"

Terry's eyes snap open.

"Cripes," chuckles Ralph. His oldest friend. "You look like you've been caught out."

Despite his surprise and Ralph's smile, Terry detects the same look of panic in the latter's eyes as Ralph must have seen in his own.

Act normal.

"Oh," Terry waves a hand. "I just... needed to clear my head, so I thought I'd—"

"Ride the tube to the end of the line and back," says Ralph with a knowing eyeroll. "Join the club, mate."

Ralph sits himself down opposite Terry. Terry hears the strain and squeak of Ralph's jeans as he settles his large body into the seat. Ralph places his hands on his knees, rubs them a few times. His smile wavers. His lip quivers.

He's not going to be here with me the whole way, is he?

Fuming.

Right, Terry decides, he'll get off in a few stations' time and catch the tube behind this one. Add a few minutes to his journey. A few minutes that could have countless consequences. Christ, he can't believe this has happened. What were the odds?

But his thoughts dissipate when Ralph's face suddenly crumples. A water balloon pricked by a needle.

Terry gapes. "Mate, are you alright?"

He can't recall the last time he saw Ralph cry. Primary school, perhaps, when those playground bullies were picking on him. Making fun of his large size. Terry tried to stand up for Ralph that day. Terry was smaller and skinnier than Ralph and the bullies were smaller and skinner than Terry, but they were pack animals. Terry's eye bloomed like a midnight rose for weeks afterwards. But Ralph had reached down and helped him up.

Terry remembers this and reaches his own hand across the tube carriage. His attempt at comfort floats in midair, but the gesture lingers.

"N-n-no," Ralph splutters. He covers his eyes. His entire body jerks with each sob.

"What's happened?" Terry asks.

Ralph sniffs. "Oh, God." He draws his shoulders up. Takes a moment to compose himself. "I've just been finding things so tough these days. Me and Sharon are fighting all the time since the kids left." He rubs his nose with the back of his hand. "I keep thinking she's going to... leave, as well." His voice squeezes, hisses the last words out. Words inconceivable to him. "So," he continues, "the last few

months I've been getting up early on the weekends and riding the tube up and down just like this."

"This is... Arnos Grove."

"Sometimes," says Ralph. He inhales. His eyes refill. "Sometimes—Christ, I can't believe I'm telling you this—sometimes I imagine... just getting off at the airport, jumping on a plane and running away for good."

For a moment the only noise to be heard is the coughing of the train along the tracks. Ralph's body shakes soundlessly now.

"I know how you feel," Terry mutters. It pains him to see his friend in this state. For a little while, he forgets his woes. He wants to say the right things.

Ralph looks ashamed. "Oh, Tel, I'm sorry—"

"Do you think..." Terry strokes his own chin. "Do you think *she* thinks you feel this way? Does she know?"

A crease in Ralph's brow. He hadn't thought of that.

"I hadn't thought of that," he confirms. "I just feel so *sure* she's going to leave me. It's like she already knows. You know?"

Terry can't help arching an eyebrow. He knows.

"Gosh," Ralph makes a chuckle sound, but he's not laughing. "Course you do. Jesus, mate, I'm really sorry—"

"Don't apologize."

"Harping on about my marriage problems and you're likely sat there thinking *well at least you've still got a wife—*"

"Not at all," Terry says truthfully. "Your problems and feelings are valid." An affirmation borrowed from his and his wife's old marriage counsellor.

Bashful, Ralph sighs through his nose. "Cheers, mate," he mumbles.

A brief silence embarks their carriage. Ralph opens his mouth, goes to say something else. Hesitates. Joins his hands as if in prayer.

Terry senses a slight reduction in their speed. “Right,” he says. “I suppose I best—”

“Did you ever feel the way I do now,” Ralph interjects, “before she left?”

His question slows time. Terry’s mind rattles and whirrs into the next station along with it.

“This is... Bounds Green.”

Terry tilts his head. Thinks about it. “No,” he says simply.

Ralph’s eyes fill again, this time with surprise and sympathy.

“I was too preoccupied,” Terry goes on. “After counseling, I thought we’d worked it out, you know? And I never thought about it again.” He shrugs one shoulder. “And I never asked her how she felt again.” His throat tightens, to his utter dismay.

Bloody hell, Tel. Keep it together.

“Do you wish you asked her?” Ralph says. “Do you think it would have—”

“Made a difference?” Terry finishes. He expels air slowly through puffed cheeks. “To be honest, mate...”

I’ve absolutely no idea. She never asked me how I felt either. It was always going to end.

Say the right things.

“...It probably would have made a difference,” Terry admits, or lies. He’s not sure which. “Every day I wish I’d handled it differently.” No harm in a spot of embellishment.

Ralph considers this. Fingernails in his mouth.

Terry's eyes flicker to the young man and woman who have just hopped into the carriage. They seem awfully sprightly for such a time of a Sunday.

He steeples his fingers and leans towards Ralph. Instinctively, Ralph mirrors his movements. "What exactly do you and Sharon fight about?" Terry asks.

Ralph throws his head back. A most unhappy laugh. "Don't get me started," he says. "It's *everything*, mate. You see, I can't focus since the twins left and to be fair Shaz's always hated when I forget things, but now I'm forgetting things all the bloody time. Medical appointments, shopping lists, even holiday bookings, flights, the lot." He bows his head. "It's got to the point where everything I do seems to annoy her. And I don't know how to fix it for her." His voice shoots up an octave.

Stone dread drops into Terry's stomach. Ralph and Sharon married very young. Had their children very young. He's seen and heard about this kind of thing before.

Nonetheless, Terry clears his throat. "Communication," he declares, his index finger held aloft, "is king."

Or was it key? Another anecdote from his friendly neighborhood marriage counselor.

"Eh?" says Ralph.

Terry spreads his arms in a rainbow. He's holding an invisible tapestry, a prophecy of sorts. "You've just got to *talk* to her, mate!" he cries. "Tell her how *you're* feeling and ask her how *she's* feeling."

Ralph ponders. "I think I can," he says. The little engine that could. But he shudders. "I don't know. What if she says she's leaving me."

"She won't," says Terry. "I promise she won't."

Shouldn't have said promise. Always making promises you can't be sure you'll keep.

"But what if she does?" Ralph presses.

“Look, mate.” Terry shifts in his seat. Assumes a managerial stance. “All I can say is you can’t go on like this.”

Another silence. The wailing souls are eavesdropping.

“For all you know,” Terry points out—points out and points at Ralph, “she’s probably lying awake right this minute, missing you. Wondering where on earth you’ve got to.”

Ralph appears buoyed by these words. His slumped shoulders lift a fraction.

“Maybe,” he says. A smile teases his lips, a sparkle his eyes. Dazed by love. Terry’s heartstrings sting.

The train chugs into the next station.

“You should go back to her,” Terry advises. He jabs his finger at the carriage door. “Get off now and go right back to her.”

Ralph slams his beefy hands onto his knees. “You’re right.” He exhales a gust. “You’re right, Tel. I’ve got to at least try.” He rises to his feet.

“You’re gonna be fine,” Terry reassures him with a nonchalant wave.

“This is... Wood Green.”

Ralph clenches his fists and jumps out onto the platform. He darts a few steps. His trainers squeak as he pauses to turn back.

“Hang on,” he says. “I never got to ask—”

But the excitable *beep-beep-beep* rings out, and the doors slide shut before Ralph gets to ask. Terry sees his friend’s mouth form the words: *are you okay?*

Thumbs up; all good. Perhaps Ralph, in his newfound clarity, noticed the pain in Terry’s eyes. But no matter. Ralph’s concerned scowl shoots sideways, swallowed by the tunnel.

Safe and alone again. Alone aside from the nattering young man and woman, who haven’t yet sat down.

“...Impossible to get her to leave Bounds Green,” the young man is saying. “I really wanted to go to Soho.”

“I don’t understand why so many people in London are incapable of leaving the village they live in,” says the young woman. “I mean, hello! This is *London*. The world is *literally* your oyster.”

“Exactly!” the man cries. “A city of infinite possibilities!”

“That must be why it’s called an Oyster Card,” the girl says. She’s frowning at the little blue card in her hand.

“Did you only just clock that now? You numpty.”

Laughter. “Shut up. I’ve only been here a few months.”

“Well, have you been to The Cock yet? Pretty decent pub...”

Their voices fade into the tunnel of Terry’s subconsciousness.

“This is... Turnpike Lane.”

The world is your oyster. People incapable of leaving the village they live in. Terry takes offence from that remark. The Cock.

He met his wife in a pub of the same name. The insufferable swarm of memories bursts through his brain’s cracks and floods him. His estranged wife. He remembers when he first beheld her.

Amy. Her blonde hair, her bleached blonde hair flicked—more than flicked—cascaded across her left shoulder as she turned away from a potential suiter at the bar. Her ocean blue eyes met his mahogany brown ones.

Of course, Terry remembers this moment in slow motion. He scoffs quietly at his cheesiness.

“This is... Manor House.”

Two more people step into the carriage. The dull trundle of suitcase wheels. Tourists on their way to the airport.

That makes three of us.

Terry's hands unconsciously pat the pockets of his jeans and jacket. Phone. Wallet. Passport.

He'll buy a new wardrobe, a new life for himself in Turkey. In Bodrum. He's got family there. Family he's not close to, hasn't seen in years, but he'll win them round, make them his friends. He's a charming guy. He wouldn't be the managing director of a real estate business if he wasn't a charming guy.

Wouldn't be. Isn't anymore, though, is he.

"This is... Finsbury Park."

"Right," chirps the young man from before. "To the Vicky Line!"

The two energetic friends hop off the tube and skedaddle. Terry hears their shrieks in the tunnels. He thinks of his twenties. The sleep-free nights. The ambition and excitement for the future a constant high.

And the women. All the women. Terry closes his eyes and lets himself think about the women. Their squeals of pleasure, their tears of heartbreak. He never wanted to settle down. He never thought he ever would.

"This is... Arsenal."

He thinks about football. Christ, his season tickets. He wonders if he should give them to someone. He wonders if he'll ever get off at this station for a match again. He thinks about a networking conference he went to in the Emirates stadium a few years ago. Back in the prime of his career. Back when he still *had* a career.

"This is... Holloway Road."

A few people get on. Blank faces. Never see them again. Meditate. Deep breaths.

"This is... Caledonian Road."

Is it just him, or is time going by far too fast? He thought the automated announcements would soothe him. Why does it feel like they're hounding him?

"This is... King's Cross St. Pancras."

Two contrary groups of young people get on. A couple of wizards in full robes sit down near Terry. Three others—bucket-hatted, dark-clothed, bum-bagged—stand around the center pole. Terry manages a smile. Angels of the morning crossing paths with *divils* of the night, as his mother would say.

"Platform nine and three-quarters," titters one of the wizards. "These pics look great."

"Gosh, I wish it was real," sighs the other.

"What a sick club," says one of the ravers. "Bare music."

"I've got fucking tinnitus again, man."

"Well, we were dancing next to a speaker for five hours, to be fair."

"This is... Russell Square."

Terry looks sadly at the wizards and the ravers. Each one of them lost in their respective imaginations and fantastic realities. He remembers losing his heart to fantasy books as a teenager and his mind to dance music in his twenties, on the colorful, spiritual journeys both held his hands through. Will he ever feel excited about anything again?

"This is... Holborn."

"Come on then, chop chop. Central Line awaits," says one of the ravers, before looking over and randomly saluting Terry. "Toodles, mister man."

Terry is left once again to his thoughts. His doubts. Amy's face.

He was forty-two when he met her. She was thirty-six. He had never been in a serious relationship and he thought it would be easy. He thought it would be

easy because she was the only woman he ever loved. He thought being in love was enough. He wasn't prepared for anything else.

She wanted a baby as soon as they wed. And they tried and they tried. He couldn't understand why it didn't work. Something the matter with him. And then the IVF didn't take. Amy kept her cool. Remained hopeful and positive. But Terry didn't like how he felt about himself.

"This is... Covent Garden." He remembers taking his mother's family to an Irish bar here, long ago.

A group of tourists embarks and there's a flurry of chatter.

"We're going to *Lie-chester* Square first, then on to *Glow-chester* Road."

"Look! There's a station called *Cockfosters*!"

Laughter all around.

Terry's soul hurts. He loves Cockfosters and wants to tell these American numpties to show some respect for his hometown's perfectly valid name. So what if he never really left his own village? He's leaving now, isn't he.

He folds his arms and stews all the way through central London.

"Leicester Square."

"Piccadilly Circus."

"Green Park."

"Hyde Park Corner."

"Knightsbridge." The robot lady sounds like she's from here. Yes, Terry decides, Knightsbridge is where she's from. He has a picture of her in his mind. Vintage cigarette holder and pearls.

"South Kensington."

"Gloucester Road."

“Earl’s Court.”

Two young women get on with suitcases. They sound American. No, wait. Irish. Unusual accents, though. Different to Terry’s mother’s accent.

“Seriously, Megan, back in the day I read so much stuff about these attacks and how to avoid them and how to spot potential attackers. I was, like, obsessed.”

“Well, it’s not like that anymore.”

“I *know*, I know. But still, that’s why I made us get on the back carriage. The bad guys are more likely to get on at the front.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. And, like, you can spot the signs. For example, it’s more likely to be a guy on his own, recently shaved, and staring straight ahead, or, like, mumbling to himself.”

“Don’t stare, Melissa. It’s rude.”

Terry senses at least one pair of their eyes on him. It shocks and irritates him. He could say something. He could pontificate about how, as a schoolboy in the eighties, *he* was conditioned to fear attacks of by people from *their* home country whenever he passed through central London, despite the love for their people his mother nurtured in him. Yes, he could say that.

But no. Leave them to it. Be the bigger person.

“This is... Barons Court.” Back overground. Cold winter sun. Terry’s pulse quickens. The airport is drawing ever closer.

He blocks out the women’s bickering and all the conversations around him on the tube. He’s tired of them.

“Hammersmith.”

Think about the Knightsbridge lady. Meditate to her voice.

“Turnham Green.”

He ponders the advice he gave Ralph earlier about his marriage. He said it to be nice, because it was what he should have said. But he wonders was there something to it. More than just words.

“Acton Town.”

He remembers all the nights he came home from drowning his misery. Amy’s beautiful sleeping face. And he couldn’t make her smile anymore. He couldn’t give her a baby.

“South Ealing.”

Things got better for a little while during marriage counselling. They went on dates again, took up new hobbies together. But once their sessions finished, Terry’s sadness came right back to him. It was always waiting to come back to him.

“Northfields.”

And the night he saw her eyes meet those of a man who wasn’t him. That was when he knew he had lost her.

“Boston Manor.”

For better and for worse. In sickness and in health. Is sadness considered a sickness? It probably is, Terry thinks. Depression.

“Osterley.”

They separated a year ago. Terry told himself he was fine. He had been single and happy his whole life before he met her. He could easily revert back. No problem.

“Hounslow East.”

They sold their marital home and Terry moved into an apartment. His new bachelor pad, he told himself. Cheered himself on. This was going to be great.

“Hounslow Central.”

Then his work began to suffer. Shifty eyes in the office. Pity the poor soul. He decided to take a career break before anyone could say anything. That was two months ago. But he made up his mind he was never going back.

“Hounslow West.”

And oh. The last time he saw Amy. He’d phoned about a month ago her to let her know about his sabbatical. She was pleased for him at first, but his gloom concerned her. She came over for a cup of tea, to check he was okay. A cup of tea became a glass of wine, and a glass of wine became two and three. It was the last time they made love and the last time they spoke.

“Hatton Cross.”

He closes his eyes and thinks about that night with her. His throat is so tight he feels he might choke. What he’d give now to have just one more moment with her.

“Heathrow Terminals, 1, 2 and 3.”

The train pauses for a few moments longer at this station.

Am I a coward?

Should he go back? Should he try to get Amy back? Is he being realistic? She probably has a new boyfriend. Quit the wishful thinking and get on with it.

“This is... Heathrow Terminal 5.”

Here we are. The end of the line. Terry takes a deep breath. Can he really do this?

Suppose I can just get off and wander around for a bit.

Have a cup of tea and think about it for a bit.

He rises to his feet and moves slowly to the tube door.

Here we go. Out onto the platform with all the suitcase wheelers.

“Tel! Tel!”

What on earth?

Terry spins around. He sees Ralph lumbering fast-paced towards him.

“Ralph,” he says. “What are you—”

“I couldn’t let you—I had to make sure you were okay—” Ralph is sweating, his breathing labored. He raises a finger like *give me a second* and leans on his knees to catch his breath. “I just had this awful feeling—”

“How did you get here before me?” Terry asks.

“Jumped in a cab soon as I got out the station,” says Ralph. “But Tel, mate, you weren’t thinking of leaving, were you? Just something you said earlier, when I said the thing about running away on a plane... got me thinking...”

Terry releases all the air from his lungs in drawn-out defeat. “I was thinking about it,” he admits. Shrugs.

Ralph lunges and embraces him. Squeezes the life out of him, but Terry welcomes it.

“You can’t leave,” Ralph sobs. “You can’t. You have to stay, you’ll be okay, we’ll figure something out. You and Amy’ll work it out, just like me and Sharon will. You can get back together.”

Fat tears squeeze themselves out of Terry’s eyes. His body, tense and aching, collapses against Ralph’s bulk and he allows his emotions to take the wheel.

They stay like that for a while. Terry loses himself in his love for his best friend. Ralph, with his most kind heart.

A passing youth swipes, “Batty boys!”

Terry sniffs. Christ, his nose is running like a tap.

They separate.

“Right,” Terry says. “What next?”

Ralph looks around him. He curls his lip in thought. “We could get a coffee around here or something,” he suggests. “Do some plane spotting.”

Terry considers it. Decides against it. “Nah. I’ll get us a cab home. Let’s do breakfast in Cockfosters.”

He feels lighter. That ninety-minute journey went by in a flash. He was so sure he was ready to leave London, to get away from all the non-things his life had thrown at him in the last year. But now, all he wants to do is go home.

They get in a taxi and Terry’s eyelids sag immediately. Exhausted. He nods off to the sound of Ralph chatting to their driver.

A little while into the journey, his phone vibrates him awake. Groggy, he shuffles it out of his jeans pocket. Squints at it.

It’s a text from Amy.

Hey Terry. Hope you’re well. This is a bit of a happy shock, but I found out yesterday I’m pregnant, 4 weeks gone (yours, obviously!!). Sorry to tell you over text, I just felt too anxious to do it any other way. Let me know if you’re free for a call and we can chat about it. I’m so happy. X

Terry laughs. Why are we all so awkward? Why do we find it so hard communicate with one another?

“What’s so funny?” Ralph asks.

Terry melts into his seat. He recalls Ralph’s dazed look of love from earlier, and his heart no longer hurts.

“Tell you later, mate,” he says.

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GUEST WRITER

C. J. Peterson writes science articles for a general audience and science fiction for a discerning few.

Summer

by C. J. Peterson

Antoinette scanned the crowd. No grown-ups, lots of kids. That was Genevieve, running onto the play area from the parking lot while securing her venous catheter under her jersey. Chima and Chiama, the twins, rolled around on the turf as if they were still conjoined. She recognized several others in her network and double-checked their ages on her phone. She was the oldest one there, at fourteen, so she would be in charge today.

“Hey, guys! Balls!” Blaise shoved past her, swinging a mesh bag. “I’ve got **balls!**” he shouted, pleased with himself as only a pre-teen boy could be. Mycroft jumped out of the car. Without even looking, Antoinette said “Shoes” and he climbed back in.

On the field, Cordelia and Her Cousins tackled each other repeatedly in the hope of crashing their security drones overhead. Cordelia paused to wave. Mirabelle stepped out of the car and then Mycroft hit the pavement with a thud. “Go say hi to Genevieve,” Antoinette suggested. “I’ll be right there.” The youngsters walked onto the field hand in hand. “Mr. Dunwoodie, please secure the car.”

Cordelia’s cousins were now emptying the mesh bag and pelting Blaise with balls. “She’s right here!” Cordelia said loudly. “Tell my parental figure that you’re right here.”

“I’m right here,” Antoinette said, smiling, when close enough to her friend to be heard through her phone.

“And you’re sure your mother wants a guest this week?” The woman’s voice was muffled, emanating from somewhere inside Cordelia’s sports bra.

“She said she texted you! Didn’t you get it?”

“I’m sure it’s here somewhere. We’re docking. I’ve got to go. You girls keep your phones on, and be safe, okay?”

“Oh... kay,” they chorused obediently. The connection cut off. “My mom texted that I could stay at your house this week,” Antoinette clarified.

“Well done,” Cordelia said.

On the field, the girls organized kickball, then soccer, then tag. They got the IDs of any players who were not already in their network. These children abandoned the game abruptly when their phones summoned them to return to their caregivers. Sometimes you could see a car in the lot flashing its lights impatiently. Eventually, Antoinette declared everyone the winner. Then she led her charges to the front entrance of the building, where a huge sign said:

Grand View Rest Stop
next rest stop 286 km

Inside the food court the young people scattered, some to sit strategically near families or adult couples. “We have time for a hot meal,” Mirabelle decided. Antoinette herded her littles through the serving stations and told the cashier, “We’re all together.”

“And where is The Highway taking you today?” The cashier wanded their trays, then Antoinette’s phone.

Blaise said brightly, “I’m going to my Nana’s house.”

“Visiting my non-custodial parent,” said Antoinette. She glanced at the amount charged to James Dunwoodie and stowed her phone.

“Math camp,” the youngest two said together.

“Well, you stay safe. Next, please.”

As they carried their trays away, Mirabelle whispered, “Do you even have a Nana?”

“My step-mother thinks I do,” Blaise answered.

They ate quickly, packing their uneaten food for later. The last of the vacationing families and harried business travelers were back on the road. There were no other unaccompanied minors in sight; the rest of their friends had already slipped away.

Outside the building, a man standing alone glanced quickly at each of them. Antoinette turned directly toward him, so that her phone and Mr. Dunwoodie got a clear shot of his face. Blaise did the same. No alarms went off; this guy wasn’t a threat. Mycroft said loudly, “I don’t want my leftovers. I’m just going to leave them here.” He set his box on top of the recycling sorter. The man shot him a grateful look and grabbed the box a second later.

“Mr. Dunwoodie, please retract rooftop solar and open both doors.” They entered the car and settled into the seats, one on each side of the windowless interior. The doors melded shut behind them in an impregnable seal. “James, is there any news?” Antoinette felt she could be familiar with the car’s operating system in the privacy of the car itself.

“There is no news,” said the car in its even baritone. “Notice: there are inclement forecasts for these points on your current route.” The map appeared on the front screen. “You have 15 pre-set destinations.”

“Yes, I do,” Antoinette acknowledged. Destinations now halfway across the country. “As a responsible young lady, however, I can be trusted to over-ride the parental pre-set itineraries.” And erase the trip logs every 12 hours.

“Hell,” Blaise griped. “How can a *forecast* be inclement?”

“Watch your language,” Antoinette said. “It’s not the forecast that’s inclement, it’s something else. Probably just the weather. But whatever it is, the car won’t take us there. So look for other routes.”

“We could go to History Land. It’s got reconstructions of suburban neighborhoods from the olden days.” Mirabelle read out loud: “*Throw a plastic Frisbee flying disc on a real grass lawn. Play with cats and dogs kept indoors as pets.*” She quickly added, “They have a waterpark, too.”

“James, run a query on History Land and show ages,” Antoinette said. “Okay, guys. Chima and Chiama said yes. Five other littles could meet us there tomorrow. And three big kids, which would be nice for me. What do we think?”

“Show of hands,” Mycroft said. “And it’s unanimous.”

“I’m confirming. If we go that way we can see Cordelia and Her Cousins again at Piney Branch Rest Stop in six days. And we can be back here again three days after that. James, follow the new route as shown.” The car maneuvered smoothly out of the parking lot and onto The Highway. Antoinette sighed. “Wow, the summer is going so fast.”

Mirabelle opened the central console and stowed their belongings. She put the drinks in the cool compartment and stuffed all the wrapped snacks and sandwiches into a backpack. Food this expensive would quickly spoil, but they wouldn’t keep it too long. She checked the balance on Mr. Dunwoodie’s service station account. “Look, we’re fully charged,” she announced. “And we actually sold energy back to the grid.”

“James, please clear the forward screen.” Antoinette blinked at the bright sun. The sky was clear as a sapphire. This far from the national borders, there wasn’t even a jet’s contrail to soften the glare. The passenger cars around them, and the freight convoy in the far lane, were synced so precisely that they seemed motionless, the pavement rushing like a river beneath them. “James, suggest the best eduvids about the next protectorate on our route.”

“Here is a list of eduvids.”

“James, play ‘A Wilderness Regained’.” The window darkened for the opening montage. “I, at least, will learn something while playing hooky.”

“I will, too,” said Mirabelle loyally, and set her earbud to Antoinette’s channel.

Mycroft leaned back and adjusted his headrest, flipping the VR goggles over his eyes. “Now where were we?”

Blaise assumed the same pose in his seat. “I believe I was kicking your ass.”

“Language,” said Antoinette, and after that the car was so still and silent that they couldn’t even tell they were traveling.

*

After the video ended, Mirabelle called her mother’s work station. “Hi,” she said. “Sorry. I know she’s busy. But can you just ask her, is it okay if I buy smoothies for my friends?” Pause. “No, I don’t mean the entire camp. Thanks. I will. Yes, I will. No, I won’t.” She tucked the phone into the placket of her sundress. “Be good. Leave my phone on,” she told Antoinette. “And not call again during work hours.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No, her assistant. There was some fire they were putting out.”

“That’s just an expression, you know.”

“Well, I hope so.” Mirabelle addressed the car. “James, where is the nearest served food?”

“If you decelerate for the next exit and proceed five kilometers on surface roads, you can reach the nearest convenience station in seventeen minutes.”

“James, do it. Hey, guys! Smoothies!”

Blaise pulled off his goggles and leaped to his feet as Antoinette said, “Don’t stand up in the car.”

“Why not? It’s not like we’re going to crash. And if we did crash, it’s not like we’d get hurt. And if we did get hurt, it’s not like James couldn’t save our lives with first aid.” He sat down.

“Mycroft, take your meds,” Antoinette said. “Both of you, message your grown-ups before they start to wonder about you.”

“Done and done,” Mycroft said. “And... message acknowledged.”

“You’re just sending the same message you sent yesterday. *‘Having fun. See you when school starts’*,” Blaise scoffed. “So... can I copy it?”

“Sure.”

A second or two passed. “I got the same auto-reply you got.” Satisfied, Blaise commanded, “James, clear the side screens.” He turned in his chair. “Yikes, we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s pretty.” They had imperceptibly left The Highway and were coasting down a two-lane road past fences and pastures, dotted with woods.

“Hey, I’m getting a ping on the network,” Mycroft said.

“What, out here?”

“James, locate ping.” The car slowed, then pulled off the road onto the shoulder.

“James, open doors.” The roadside door remained shut. Mycroft stepped out on the other side and studied the landscape. “There he is!” They saw a kid’s hand, holding up a phone, then the rest of him plowing through the tall weeds. “Hey! What are you doing out there?”

“I live here,” the boy answered. He stopped before he got to the fence, probably at some perimeter warning only he could hear. “What are you doing?”

“Getting smoothies. You want one?”

“Mint chocolate anti-oxidant.”

“Wait there!”

Within minutes four young people with five large cups were navigating through and over the old wire fence. “Thanks,” said the new kid. “Can I pay you for the smoothie? I’m Lemuel, by the way.”

“It’s on me. I’m Mirabelle. This is my half-sister, Antoinette.”

“And this is my half-brother, Blaise,” said Antoinette.

“And this is my step-brother, Mycroft,” said Blaise.

“My mother married his father because they had sons the same age,” Mycroft said.

“Making his mother my step-mother,” Antoinette added.

“And my father her step-father,” Mirabelle concluded.

Everyone took a pull on their drinks.

“Makes me glad I’ve just got two moms,” Lemuel said laconically. “But they’re not here; they work in different facilities and take both cars. So they got this place for me. This used to be an isolation ward on forty hectares. I’m having what you call an idealic childhood.”

Blaise toggled his phone and asked it, “What is an idealic childhood?”

A generic voice replied. “An idyllic childhood is defined by many experts as one with security but also freedom for self-directed socialization, learning, and play.”

“Also, you know, fresh air,” said Lemuel. “You want to see my hideout?” They did, of course. Lemuel led them back down the field and into a culvert with a trickle of water in it, dripping from a cylindrical hole in the hillside. “This is the secret passage.” They had to stoop and enter in single file. It wasn’t completely dark; a faint glow shimmered ahead of them. Lemuel crawled through it and into the tunnel beyond. Blaise stopped in the shaft of light and peered upward.

“Man, where the hell are we?”

“Under The Highway.”

Mycroft squeezed in next to Blaise. “Oh, that must be where water drains off the road.”

“Sometimes water, but all the time air. There’s an incredible volume of air displaced by vehicular traffic.”

“Move, you guys.” The boys crawled forward and the girls crept into the gap. “I can feel it,” said Mirabelle.

“There would be even more wind if there weren’t all those layers of turbines. All those little blades power the machines between us and The Highway. They never stop. Everybody scootch toward me.” They crabbed forward, then settled with their backs curved against one side of the pipe and their feet braced on the other. “Listen.”

It was faint. A low hum. Antoinette shut her eyes to hear better, and caught a second harmonic.

“Sounds like ballistic missiles revving up,” said Blaise.

“It does not,” Antoinette snapped. “I bet this is one of those sounds adults can’t hear.”

“Probably,” Lemuel said. “The equipment controls the structural integrity of The Highway and weighs the loads and adjusts for the weather and all that. Nothing can get up to The Highway. Nothing can fall down on it, not even a bug. Nothing can drive on it but authorized automobiles. And the grid shares all the information about every vehicle. It’s totally automated. That’s why it’s totally safe.”

“But what about you, Lemuel?” Mirabelle’s eyes were wide. “You don’t have a car. Are you safe?”

“Oh, sure. That’s why we moved here. There are no, uh...”

“...population centers,” Antoinette offered.

“Right. There are no population centers near us. Nothing bigger than the guard station where you got the smoothies. My house tracks where I am and who’s nearby, just like your car does for you.”

Mirabelle relaxed. Antoinette wondered if Lemuel was older than he looked, perhaps closer to her age. The boy suddenly said, “Yo. I can’t talk. I’m in the hideout. Ping these guys.”

“Bump,” said Blaise, and held out his phone. Lemuel touched his phone to Blaise’s, then passed it to Mycroft to do the same, and on down the line. After that, they could all hear the caller on their earbuds.

“Wish I was in the hideout instead of this stupid carpool. Science camp to martial arts. Effing enrichment.” His five listeners agreed with him by groaning “yeah” in unison. “*Children first, my ass.*”

Blaise grinned. “*Children are the future, my ass.*”

“Look at the network,” Antoinette said. “Federico, you’re just two friends away from our friend Genevieve.”

“Is it the same Federico?” Mirabelle asked, then caught herself. “I guess there wouldn’t be more than one.”

“Run a query on this drive-in movie that Mr. Dunwoodie has signed up for. Mr. James Dunwoodie.”

“I see it,” Federico said. “What, you just drive into this abandoned mall parking lot and everyone streams the same movie?”

“Yeah, and we go from car to car and eat and hang out.”

“Who’s James Dunwoodie?”

“My mom had a boyfriend named Dunwoodie,” Blaise explained.

“I just like saying ‘*Home, James.*’” Antoinette imitated a snooty Edwardian dowager.

“Lem, we could carpool.”

“Okay, thanks, man,” Lemuel said. “Later, dude.” The connection ended. Each of them re-positioned their phones over their hearts. Then they crept back out of the storm drain.

As they stood blinking and stretching outside, Mirabelle asked, “Where does this stream go?”

“This isn’t a stream. But it leads to a stream. Which is fed by a spring.”

“Can you jump on it?” asked Blaise.

“It’s not that kind of spring,” Mirabelle said reverently. “A real spring-fed stream would have amphibians.”

“You want to see it?” They did, of course.

“I’m getting the backpack,” Antoinette said. “I’ll catch up with you.”

It was a short walk to the clear, burbling rivulet and they promptly waded in, then forged upstream between low trampled banks and over moss-covered rubble and into the dappled woods, sparkling with sequins of summer sun, and murmurous with life. Soon they were wet up to their waists. The girls moved their phones to their leotards and stowed their sundresses in the backpack. Antoinette was just starting to feel its weight when Lemuel directed them to get out. There was a snag of tree trunks and branches across the creek.

“I was trying to build a dam,” he explained. He picked his way around the edge of the pile, climbing till he was level with the top layer of sticks. “I was trying to make this into a swimming hole. See, the spring is over there. It used to be a well. Then all these stones were put here to make a kind of decorative grotto where the veterans could, you know,” he paused. “Rest.” The passengers of Mr. James Dunwoodie were staring.

“Oh. My. Effing. God.” Blaise walked right into the shallow pool.

“You can drink the spring water. I mean, you want to go right where it comes up.” They sloshed toward the other end, and Lemuel pointed.

“It’s like a water fountain.” Mycroft sounded awestruck. “In the *ground*.”

Mirabelle filled her smoothie cup and sipped cautiously. Blaise dunked his head in the spring. “You could totally make this into a swimming hole,” Antoinette declared. “You made this great dam with sticks, but if we dug out these rocks and piled them up, we could reinforce it and also make the pond deeper on this side.” She threw the backpack onto the bank and grabbed a rock. “Here, give me a hand.”

“Sweet!” Blaise yelled.

“Careful, you guys,” Lemuel said, kneeling beside Antoinette. “I don’t want to have to call in an emergency drone. We don’t want any information exchanges.”

“Ain’t gonna happen,” said Blaise.

The first few rocks were easy. Later they had to do more digging. In the end they needed levers and complicated skids to move the rocks and fit them into position. Eventually there was so much mud they couldn’t see their knees, much less the bottom, and the littles had to collect rocks from the bank.

Mycroft pried up a stone and Mirabelle, standing behind him, shrieked. She knelt to give her phone a better shot. It was a salamander, shrinking into the mud where the rock had been. Everyone crowded around to film and capture and re-locate the little thing. Then they turned back toward the pool.

And there it was. A perfect swimming hole. The mud had settled and water was trickling through the dam, but not faster than the spring was filling the pond. Thrilled and disbelieving, they eased into the water and tip-toed carefully into the middle. There was just enough room for all of them to float on the clear surface.

Antoinette balanced so carefully on the water that she felt the current from the spring flowing down over her head like a benediction. Her face was almost submerged and the sun stung her eyes through her lashes. Her muscles ached. It was wonderful.

This could have been her: one kid with two parents, having an idyllic childhood. Thank God her parents had divorced! Thank God for serial monogamy — she had a family! With all the parents and stepparents and surviving elders of all the children working together to ensure their safety.

Antoinette stood up. At the spring, she poured cups of water over herself, and then did the same for Mirabelle. Blaise said, “Hey, Toni...”

“Food’s in the backpack,” she answered. “For you, too, Lemuel.”

As they ate they dripped onto the bank and after a while the slanting rays of the sun dried their skin and hair. A sudden breeze rushed overhead and flipped the leaves back and forth, so that they flashed their gray undersides like a shower of ashes. Mirabelle said softly, “I was hoping to see an indicator species. And then I did. This proves there is a God. This proves that everything is going to be all right.”

Unobserved, Antoinette exchanged a tiny smile with Lemuel. Mycroft bent to gaze into Mirabelle’s eyes and said, “It might. It also proves we are really lucky.”

“I know we are, Mikey. As long as we’re together.”

“As long as we’re together,” Mycroft repeated, as if swearing an oath.

Blaise rolled his eyes. “Okay, you two,” Antoinette said.

“I’m really lucky, too,” Lemuel said tactfully. “But right now I think my house is calling me.” He gathered up food wrappers and rubbed them to dust between his palms. “My moms texted. Something’s going on and they’re both working late. I’m supposed to go inside when it gets dark.” The others nodded. “There’s a trail over here. It leads to an old dirt road.”

“Man, I wanted to go back down the creek,” Blaise said, but even he didn’t seem to believe it.

“I’ll tell James to pull around.” They walked until they could glimpse the car waiting beyond the locked gate. Antoinette hugged Lemuel briefly. “Thanks for everything.” He seemed to be all bones and sharp angles under his clammy shirt.

“Sure. I’ll see you at the drive-in.” He returned her hug lopsidedly, one hand holding his phone, then turned back on the path. Antoinette caught up with the littles as they climbed through the bars of the gate. In the car she asked if there was any news.

“There is no news.” There might be news for grownups, but nothing the car would share with them. The doors sealed.

“James, clear all the screens.” The littles kicked off their shoes and rummaged around in their duffel bags for dry clothes. Antoinette swiveled in her chair to peer out. It seemed dark all of a sudden. The trees clasped hands overhead as if lifting a dusky purple blanket for them to pass beneath. Then the woods fell away and they accelerated up the entry ramp. Beyond The Highway a faint white glow leached into the sky, flashing occasionally. It might be sheet lightning. They weren’t going that way.

The car slipped into an empty lane next to the usual line of freight trucks, endlessly en route, forever delivering commodities. There were no other passenger automobiles visible.

Antoinette reclined her seat to lie flat. The skin on her nose felt tight and her cheeks were warm. The days were definitely getting shorter, but there was still summer left. She had a sunburn and she was lounging in a damp bathing suit, so deliciously cool it was a pleasure to remember sweating. The night was starless. Or perhaps James had darkened the window. She realized the little ones were quiet, already asleep on their seats, stretched out against each wall.

Someday she’d have to say, “Home, James,” and choose which gated enclave that would be, which of the littles she’d have to leave behind. And then there would be carpools to medical check-ups and emergency drills and tutors and restricted-

access labs. But not yet. It wasn't yet time to shuttle from stepdad to stepmom, to take on this year's share of new responsibilities, to glimpse the chaos of adulthood through the ever-widening crack in her childhood. Not yet.

For now they were snug as kittens curled up below deck in a slow sea. She pressed one ear to the headrest. She heard a faint hum as James carried them through the night toward another golden day; and all the other kids, too, that were crisscrossing the land at the same time, the lucky ones, were not really lost, but safe in their shared secret gardens. And now the darkness was complete.

Thank you, Mr. Dunwoodie, she said, though maybe she just thought she said it. James.

Home.

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