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About 3800 words

Lost Cosmonauts

In the warm months they were sent into the neighborhood to do yard work. Eight of them would file out of the house and split off into pairs, soldiers with the same mission, pushing clattering lawn mowers and dragging rakes and brooms. In the winter, armed with wide-bladed shovels, they launched similar assaults on the snow piled on sidewalks and driveways. All of the money they made was to be carried back home and given to Sir. Failure to report all funds received would result in a day without food. If they were lucky and Linda was in good spirits, she would give them each a dollar or two to keep for themselves.

Jen told Avery that they were brother and sister and he believed her because he had no reason not to. They had the same black hair, the same high cheekbones. He had been a toddler when they had come to live with Linda and Sir, but Jen was six years older than him and would entertain Avery with stories about their mother as they marched from one job to the next.

“She worked in a fancy restaurant,” Jen said. “Rich, important businessmen would come there to see her because she was pretty. One night, she came home early and sent the babysitter away. There was this guy with her. He was wearing a suit but his tie was loose and his shirt was untucked. He sat on the couch and smiled at us and asked us our names. I told him yours because you couldn’t talk much yet. Mom came back out and said, ‘Aren’t you all just getting along famously?’ Then she put on a record, and picked you up and swung you around in her arms and she sang really loud. I looked over and the man was watching her and smiling, and I was smiling too.”

“And then what happened?”

She shrugged. “Then she put us to bed and we went to sleep.”

They made their escape under cover of night. Jen snuck into the boys’ room and shook Avery awake. He stood behind her as she slid the window open and dropped their swollen book bags over the side. The cool evening air swept around her like a current and raised goose bumps on his arms. She slid one leg over the threshold and then the other, and dropped a couple of feet to the turf below. Avery boosted himself up on his knees and then carefully swung around to face into the room. He slid down slowly. The ledge pulled up his shirt and bit into his bare stomach. He looked up and saw that the boy who slept in one of the lower bunks was awake and staring at him. The boy raised one hand and gave a slow wave. Avery tried to reciprocate, but he couldn’t hold on. He landed hard on his butt.

They stuck close to the houses to avoid streetlights, swishing through the grass, Avery limping and rubbing at his backside. They walked until they met the creek that ran along the

back of the neighborhood, and then followed it to a playground. It was made up to look like a castle, with ladders and turrets and a noisy wooden bridge. They climbed up the slide into the little shelter at the top, Jen's shoes squeaking against the tin, and huddled inside with their knees pressed into their chests.

"We aren't staying here," she said. "I just wanted to tell you a few things. I put some of your clothes in your backpack and I grabbed some cans out of the cupboard. I have a few dollars that I saved up, too. Don't worry. We'll be okay."

Jen rifled through both bags, checking the inventory, and then they were off again. They kept following the creek until it disappeared into a concrete pipe beneath a road, and then they followed the road. There weren't many cars, but when one came they would lie flat in the tall weeds a few feet from the shoulder until it passed. The sky began to turn from black to violet and Jen steered them into a thicket between the road and an open field. They found a relatively clear spot, kicked aside the loose leaves and fallen branches and laid on the ground, using their backpacks as pillows. It was uncomfortable and Avery was certain he would never fall asleep, but he was very tired.

The good thing about the park was that it was very large and mostly unlit, so they were able to move about undetected. They never spent more than a couple of nights in the same place and they rarely encountered anyone else after dark. Avery imagined it was his own strange kingdom, and each pavilion was a different palace. The nights they spent under the stars were royal camping excursions, either for sport or as a means of exploring his vast empire. Hiding

from the occasional muttering bum or spotlight-wielding ranger was simply a hazard of being in the wilderness. One must be careful not to antagonize the barbarians.

Jen spent a couple of days embarking on quests for useful items. Though she had thought to pack toothbrushes and toothpaste and soap, she had not brought a container for water. So on one of her first ventures out, she returned with a tin bucket, green with a yellow flower painted on the side, and two empty plastic water bottles. They used a park water fountain to clean them, and then the bucket had become their sink, bathtub and washing machine. The bottles were easy to refill throughout the day. In this way, they were able to stay both hydrated and relatively clean. The next evening, she brought back a brightly-colored quilt for them to lie upon at night, and every few days she brought more food, vegetables or fruit that they would eat out of the can with pilfered plastic spoons.

She had insisted that Avery needed to be getting an education somehow, so he began spending his days at the library branch at one end of the park. But on his fourth straight day of attendance, he noticed one of the librarians regarding him suspiciously. On his way out the door, he grabbed a pamphlet off the counter. It featured a condensed map of the city with the various library locations highlighted. Jen did some calculating and showed him that there were four branches within an hour's walk, so he began rotating, traveling to the furthest locations on nice days and staying close when there was rain or the heat was too much.

"I think I might have found a job," said Jen.

Avery spooned the last of the diced pears from the can, dessert. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she said. "It's no great shakes, because I don't have an I.D. But I was talking to this guy today. He said I could bus tables at this one restaurant, or wash dishes maybe. It would only be for a few bucks an hour, but it'd be cash. Which would be good, because we're out of money."

Avery tilted the can back and filled his mouth with pear syrup.

"We've actually been broke for a while, Ave. I just didn't want you to worry. This guy also said he might be able to set us up with a place to stay."

"Good," Avery said. "I'm tired of the mosquitos."

They spread out on the quilt and stared up at the grey ceiling of the Ottoman Pavilion, their home for the last week. It was one of the best spots in the park for two reasons: the dense bushes right next door, good for stashing their belongings during the day and hiding in at night if necessary, and also because the picnic tables were arranged in a circle around the diameter, affording them a modicum of protection and privacy as they slept in the middle. It reminded Avery of the wagon trains from the Old West, and he imagined that their royal convoy had stopped there and coiled around them for protection from any beasts or savages that might be roaming about. He also loved the grand domed roof, which pillowed up in diminishing curves, like a dollop of whipped cream atop a sundae.

"Tell me what you learned in school today," Jen said.

Avery thought for a moment. He always wanted to tell her about something especially interesting, and he would stockpile the good stuff for days that he had spent mostly goofing off

and had learned nothing. A night bird captured his attention with its persistent chirp, and it reminded him of one he had saved up.

“There were these scientists in Chicago who wanted to know if birds could dream,” he said. “So they measured their brain waves and it turns out that they dream about their songs. They remember new songs they heard during the daytime and rehearse them in their sleep, and then the next day, they can sing them. And they get better and better.”

Jen didn’t respond for a long time, and when she did her voice was thick with sleep.

“We’ve got to get you some math books or something.”

After she got the job at the restaurant, the routine changed. Avery would still go off to ‘school’ in the mornings, but Jen was usually still sleeping when he left. When he got back, she would be gone and he would have to fend for himself. He would eat and then lay out their makeshift bed and travel to the water fountain after dark to fill the bucket. He entertained himself with stolen magazines. Taking books set off the alarm, but the periodicals slid in to his waistband easily and attracted no such attention. He was usually good about sneaking them back in and returning them, but sometimes he was not. Jen’s new schedule had also meant that they had begun to avoid pavilions because she was worried about leaving him out in the open all alone, so instead they had been opting for a space in the heavy bramble and brush in one corner of the park. There were no rangers to worry about there, because they rarely left their vehicles and their spotlights could not penetrate the thick undergrowth. But there were other concerns, like raccoons and possums and the occasional stray dog, and so they made sure to walk much further than before to dispose of empty food containers. Even with new responsibilities and poached

reading material to distract him, Avery still spent most nights listening for snapping twigs and staring into dark bushes. He remained on high alert until his eyes simply refused to stay open, and then he would slip into a nervous and unrestful sleep.

And then, one morning, Jen wasn't there.

The food was undisturbed, the bucket still full of water. He sat up and waited to see if she had slipped off to go to the bathroom, but too much time passed. He walked a little way off to relieve himself, then returned and forced down a breakfast of cold instant oatmeal, and still she did not come. An oily nausea slid into his gut as he flipped through one magazine and then another until the sun was almost directly above him, and then decided to go ahead and walk to the library. Along the way, he looked down every side street, gazed into the face of every passerby, but Jen did not appear. Avery sat at one of the library computers and clicked aimlessly for a long while, then eventually gave up and slunk off to a corner, drew his knees up under his chin, and wept quietly.

As he kicked through the tangles on his way home, he heard the sound of spoon on aluminum from deeper inside and he began to crash through the brush, worried that a marauding animal was trashing the campsite or, worse, another person had found it. But when he finally emerged, he saw only his sister, in clean jeans and an immaculate white t-shirt, her hair wet and pulled back in a ponytail. She set the can down and smiled.

"Hey, Ave," she said.

He ran over and wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her small breasts and cried again. Jen laughed and said, "Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry," and then she was quiet and cupped the back of his head and waited for him to calm down.

There was no television in the apartment, just a faded thrift-store couch facing a blank wall. But there were a few amenities. They had a refrigerator, a stove and even an ancient microwave, so the food had gotten better. They had a clock radio, too, and Avery set the alarm to wake him every morning at eight o'clock. It made him feel like a grown up.

Technically, they were sharing the one bedroom, but Jen mostly slept on the couch. Their schedules were exact opposites now, Avery waking up just as she was getting home. He would eat a bowl of cereal or a short stack of frozen waffles, and Jen would sit across from him at the peeling formica table and nod in and out of consciousness. Sooner or later, she would stumble over to the couch and fall asleep before he slipped his backpack over his shoulders and stepped out the door.

She had told him that she had gotten a promotion, and that she was now waiting tables. "Just like Mom," he had said, beaming. But she didn't leave the apartment until late in the evening, after supper, and she said it was because it was a 24-hour place.

"I'm on the night shift, Ave. That's where everybody starts."

She was tired all the time, and sometimes she didn't come home an extra night. But they were out of the park, dry and safe. They had groceries and running water and electricity. She took a day off every once in a while and they caught a bus to the zoo or to see a movie. Things were better. Avery still spent days at the library, but Jen made sure he always had a few dollars in his pocket, so he sometimes bussed over to a museum or just a different part of town, and walked those streets and darted in and out of different shops. He also visited their old park from time to time, and laid on top of the picnic tables, stared up at those familiar ceilings.

One night he decided to visit Jen at work and surprise her. He set his alarm for five the next morning and left just as the sun was coming up. He knew the general area in which the restaurant was supposed to be, so he set out through the still sleeping streets. He strolled past long strips of glass and brick storefronts, now mostly empty, the painted names of extinct businesses flaking from the windows like shed skin. The sun was at his back and his shadow cast out before him, the silhouette of a giant. He passed a fire hydrant and an old striped barber's pole, and their shadows lined up next to his, the tall and lean figures of friends walking three abreast, on the way to get breakfast together.

Avery believed that he would be able to find the place once he was in the vicinity, but when he reached the area, he saw no gleaming diner or yellowed greasy spoon, just more of the same vacant storefronts. He walked up a few blocks, and then back down the other side. There was only one place that served food, a Chinese take-out joint, and that was just a window and a couple of worn plastic chairs. He considered the possibility that he had gotten the directions wrong and was about to give up and find the nearest bus stop, when Jen appeared. A rusted blue car chugged past, then swung hard to the curb. The door flew open and out she sprung, running toward him. She forgot to close the door behind her, and a hairy arm snaked out and yanked it shut as the car pulled away.

"Avery," she said, and grabbed his shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see where you worked, but I couldn't find the restaurant."

She looked up at the sky, blew a stream of air through pursed lips and blinked. "It's not here anymore, honey. It moved to a different place."

She held his hand as they walked back to the apartment. Once inside, Jen asked him to wait for her in the bedroom while she took a shower. She laid down next to him, with one towel wrapped around her body and another spiraled atop her head. Avery inched closer until their shoulders touched. She smelled warm and clean.

After a long silence, she said, “Do not ever do that again, Ave. That neighborhood is bad, even worse than this one, and you could get in a lot of trouble.”

“Okay,” Avery nodded. Then he said, “Jen, who was the man that dropped you off?”

There was another long hush. Just as he had begun to suspect his sister had fallen asleep, she spoke again. Her voice startled him.

“Tell me something you learned in school,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. He had been saving this one for a long time. “Back in the nineteen-sixties, there was this big race to see who would put a man in space first, the United States or Russia. The Russians wanted to win so badly that they sent their cosmonauts up in spaceships that weren’t really ready yet, so a bunch of them died, but Russia hid it all so that the other countries wouldn’t know that they had failed. Anyway, these two Italian brothers got some radio equipment together and made their own little listening station in an old World War II bunker, and they were able to pick up transmissions that they think were from the Russian space program. They had to get them translated. One of the recordings was of a man and woman, and at first they were reporting that everything was all right.”

At this point, Avery cupped his hand over his face and said, “*Everything is satisfactory.*” He hissed into his palm like radio static, then continued, “*We are orbiting the Earth.*”

Jen rolled away from him, onto her side.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No,” she said. “Keep going.”

“But then something went wrong. The messages started getting frantic.” He cupped his hand over his mouth again. “*Conditions growing worse. Why don’t you answer?...hisssss...we are going slower...hisssss...the world...will never know about us...*,” Avery dropped his hand. “And then that was it. They were gone.”

Avery heard his sister whimper, and her back convulsed as she wept.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She sniffled and choked. “You didn’t do anything, honey. It’s just a really sad story.” Pause, deep breath. “They must have been so scared. They died out there in the dark, all alone.”

Avery propped himself up on one elbow and touched his sister’s arm, which had gone cold. “But they weren’t all alone, Jen. They were together.”

Jen didn’t come home for a second day. But then she didn’t come home on the third day either, or the fourth.

Avery had been through this before, and so he was not immediately alarmed. He woke up, showered, dressed and went out. He made himself meals and put himself to bed. But then he became worried. He wanted to be there the moment she arrived, and so he stayed in. He read magazines, he bounced an old tennis ball off the wall and played invented games. He laid in the

bedroom and listened to talk radio and baseball games, and late at night, the international news channel, with their serious British accents and dour accounts of foreign revolutions and banking scandals. Listening to music made him sad, but all those polished, disembodied voices kept him company. He wanted to leave very badly, wanted to walk to where she had been dropped off by the blue car, but he didn't want to make her mad. And so he waited and then waited some more.

On the fifth day, he decided to walk over there anyway. If he saw her, he would duck into one of the shop doorways to hide. But he had to see her, or else he was pretty sure he would go crazy.

He took the same trek, passed the same barber pole and hydrant, but there was no sun that morning. The sky was low and grey, and as he turned the final corner, a light rain fell. He scrambled under a tattered awning and watched. Traffic increased a little, and then died down. A few strangers marched by, but they said nothing, didn't even look at him. His calves began to ache from standing, so he slid into a seated position and continued his vigil.

A pickup truck stopped across from him, black and silver with big tires. The passenger door opened and after the truck pulled away, there was a girl left standing there. He thought she was maybe Jen's age, but her hair was a dusky blond. She wore black jeans and a denim jacket that hung almost to her knees. The sleeves were bunched up and she clenched the cuffs in her hands and seemed to be shivering though it was short-sleeve weather, even with the rain. She paced a little and puffed on a cigarette. After a while, another car drew up to the curb, a battered green station wagon. The girl dropped her smoke and stepped on it then leaned down and had a conversation with the driver. Avery could hear voices, but not words. Then she got in and they drove away.

It was dark. The rain had stopped but the clouds had stayed, trapping the heat and humidity, covering his skin in a dewy sheen. Avery realized he had fallen asleep, and he looked around to get his bearings. He was sitting on a stoop, the caged door behind him leading to the space of a former convenience store, the empty shelves just visible in the sickly light of a streetlamp.

Parked on the street in front of him was the rusted blue car. The engine rumbled like an aftershock, so close and loud that he could feel the building tremble, could see the sidewalk undulate.

Avery pulled himself upright and tried to see who was behind the wheel, but the pallid artificial light could find no purchase there. The inside of the car was a vacuum, like one of the black holes he had read about, a frightening corner in space where nothing could escape, not even light.

He stood and gazed into the void for a long time, and the car stayed put, as patient as God, as stoic as death. He resisted its pull for as long as he could manage, but there was really nowhere else to go.