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Marnie McCasland

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A Brief History of Coffee

Marnie McCasland

Part One: Brewing

Toby Ratison ran his index finger along the hem of a styrofoam cup. With one tip, the boiling coffee crepted along the rim like a hesitant diver. It proceeded down the side of the cup and leaked onto his pale hand, simmering and bubbling before assimilating into the flesh. Toby let out a boisterous yelp and sprang from the cedar seat to get a tissue.

"You're such a pussy," said Bysche. "A little coffee on the hand and you're howling like a woman."

"I'm only being cautious, that's all," Toby whimpered, running the Kleenex neatly along the thin bone of his wrist. "And besides, I don't like the feeling of things on my skin."

"Well, if you're out with Elizabeth, get used to it."

Bysche reached into his bulging pocket and pulled out a firm pack of Marlboro cigarettes. He chose one like a child choosing the first present to open at Christmas.

Bysche and Toby had been going to the restaurant for coffee almost every night that summer. They had been best friends since the seventh grade, at a time when both shared a passing belief that some day they would be successful men with women lusting after them left and right. Toby's only present attestation to this was Elizabeth Parker, whose tiny features and frame paled compared to what they had in mind.

"Elizabeth's a sweetheart," Toby would often say. "It's the rest of her that seems a little sour."
The interior of the restaurant was drab and insincere. The off-white wallpaper was starting to fade, the numerous ledges collecting calendars of dust. Old-time photos lined the walls in a chronological array of what the building had been before a cheap diner: in one picture, a little girl holding a Golden Retriever puppy in the front of a pet shop, and in another, a contented prostitute using a tiny mirror to apply her lipstick while a house of ill repute hung loosely in the background. Often an unsuspecting customer would find the remnants of these scattered around the interior: a petrified tablet of dog food, a piece of lace, a pubic hair in one of the seat cushions. All this while Henry, the owner, served hot apple cider and coffee to the people.

"All these people outside, and nobody cares to stop in."

Henry stared across the street at the large crowds that always seemed to be walking away from, rather than towards, his establishment. He balanced his large head like an egg on a spoon.

There was a county fair going on a block away. There was the usual bustle of townspeople and their cars full of screaming kids cramming into parking lots, the squeaking of the old ferris wheel which proudly displayed the name of the town as if it were an advertisement for a casino. The overpriced food and cheesy camaraderie were matched only by the attitude of the employees. Spend twenty dollars on games to win a pinwheel blade, they chanted with their greasy moustaches and soiled shirts. Somewhere outside, the world was in motion.

Steadying the cup, Toby called over to Henry.

"Do you think I could get one to go?"

Henry smiled. He leaned into Toby, his sour breath tickling Toby's ear.

"Sure," he said. "But where in God's name are you going?"

He hinted that Toby might be going to the fair.

"Home."

Bysche glanced at his watch.

"It's getting late. Soon the night will be black as cat dung."

Toby always appreciated Bysche's articulate use of language. The stars were like specks of sunlight on an empty sheet of horizon.
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As Toby walked the empty streets alone, his thoughts turned to Elizabeth. It seemed as if it had been so long since he'd seen her, the tiny pale girl with the overbite. She had worn braces form age eleven to the beginning of tenth grade, when she realized that no invention would prevent her from perpetually resembling a walrus. At the coffee shop, customers would walk up to her and give her kudos on her wonderful impression, not realizing that she wasn’t making a face. Elizabeth attested that it was a good way to meet people who like going to freak shows and shooting puppies.

Toby’s freckled nose shriveled at the smell of gasoline in the air. That was what Honore Street always smelled like: gasoline. Gasoline, and cat pee, but never both at the same time. This was the one benefit of the area.

As he looked into the horizon, he leaned up a little, so that he could see the sun finally setting near the Cumberland Farms. As he reached into his pocket to pull out a cigarette, he heard a voice squeaking through the layers of humidity.

"Toby."

He turned around to see Elizabeth and her teeth staring at him from the car.

"I’ve been following you for half an hour, asking if you wanted a ride."

"I didn’t hear you."

"That’s because you’re dim. I could have run you over and it would have taken you a couple of minutes to realize you were dead. Never go to New York City, okay? Not even if you win something."

Toby took his hand out of his pocket and walked across the front of Elizabeth’s strawberry-colored Mitsubishi. Ducking into the passenger side, his behind barely touched the seat before Elizabeth started driving. He looked for the speedometer and remembered there wasn’t one. He sadly discovered the same was true for the seatbelt.

He played with his coat button, which had grown dull from his constant fiddling. He stuck his foot into the groove of the floor, tilting it from side to side. He glared out the window at passing streets which eventually began to look alike, pressing their cold concrete into your skin.
until you were left cuddling up to a brick because it reminded you of home.

Elizabeth sifted through her purse, which at this time appeared to be pregnant. She shuffled through the leather model, discarding random materials, phone numbers, empty packs of gum. Toby was starting to shake.

"I talked to my father today. I’ve never understood that man." She laid a pack of cigarettes on the dashboard. "We talked about Marjoram."

Toby couldn’t stop staring at his shivering hand. Rivers poured into deltas of veins, tributaries nestling blue ropes. His heart was pumping at an alarming rate; he felt a headache coming on.

Elizabeth muttered ("Not this again") as he vomited out the window.

Lifting his heavy head, every part of Toby’s body ached. He rubbed his stomach, which was so tender with sweat that it felt soft as dough. He removed his hands and glared at the five pink dots where his fingers had been. Slightly entertained, he pressed again, this time deeper and more direct.

Elizabeth leaned across Toby to turn the window crank. It hesitated, squeaking, and Elizabeth squealed in surprise as it finally began to shrivel upwards, and afterwards she smiled. She felt as if she had just raised the Red Sea. In an abnormally didactic mood, she turned to Toby.

"You’re drinking too much coffee."

Toby moaned and rested his aching head on the dashboard. He watched as trickles fell down the glass and it began to rain.

"I think you should take a breather for a little while, Toby. You’re always either working or at that coffee house. "You’re up to twenty or thirty cups a day, it can’t be healthy. You need to relax——"

He nodded.

"--get some sleep--"

He nodded.

"--you need to fix your wardrobe."

Toby looked down at his clothes: a filthy white undershirt covered with a dirty red t-shirt, pants that were ripping at the cuffs.

"Look at your shoes."

They were falling apart.
"I guess I should do something soon."

As they approached Toby’s house, Elizabeth leaned in and gave him a kiss on the forehead. He smiled at her, squeezing her hand. He opened the car door and she was gone before he could even say goodbye.

He looked at the moon, obnoxious in its orbit. He looked at his shoes.

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There is a certain amount of revelation that follows fatigue. As Toby Ratison sat in the quiet living room of his quiet apartment, watching the sun rise while sitting in his large chair, a pile of thoughts flowed through his tiny head so quickly that he had a difficult time distinguishing what was what. He awkwardly stuck his fingers in the fold of the armchair. Pulling his grandmother’s security blanket from the inside, he nuzzled up to the worn fabric and stuck his pudgy legs on the coffee table. He reached his arm across to lift a small cup of espresso, neatly brewed and flavored with a bit of raisin.

He ran his hands through his hair and grabbed four brown clumps from the top. At only thirty, his hair was beginning to fall out in clusters as if he were a shedding stuffed animal. Groaning, he put the hair back and settled down and fell asleep.

"Toby! Get the hell out here! Don’t you know it’s Saturday morning! Time for coffee, time for tea!"

He opened his eyes to see Bysche had somehow broken into his home and was now shaking him violently.

"What? Jesus, Bysche, you nearly killed me. How did you get in here?"

"Don’t you know it’s time for coffee, Toby? No coffee for me; I’ve already had six or seven cups. It’s you I’m worried about. Don’t you give a noodle about your health?" He nervously paced across the carpet of the room. He was very loud.

"I ... er ... I suppose we could get coffee now, if you’d like. Although it is very early, I doubt the shop will be open and if it is, then we will be--"

Bysche, deciding he had heard enough, lifted Toby by the forearm and dragged him down the rouge corridor and outside. There was protest from
Toby, but Bysche’s harmonious shouts droned out his tiny piping, beat by beat.

What a wonderful friend! What a hard-won companion! You have a lovely walk!

Part Two: The First Taste

There is a certain sting in the air of morning which gently seduces the senses into sleep. Toby uprooted a toaster from the counter and used it as a mirror to inspect his eyes, which at this point resembled golf balls with a bad case of the measles. Heaving the metal towards the door, Henry had to swerve in order to hamper decapitation.

"Whoa, settle down there, Toby. Can I get you a coffee?"
"Uh-huh."

He was getting obnoxious. Toby is often like this in the morning, like a cranky little boy who complains to his mother that he’s fed up with going to school. He blamed Bysche for the unfortunate act of waking, this terrible moment of animation.

Cars were passing by on their way to work. Those who worked on Saturday morning drove with their radios off and their coffee out of its holder, neurotic and keeping their eye on the road, for fear of catching some blue-collared man relaxing with his family on the lawn. Toby respected truck drivers because they never seemed to care what anyone else was doing. They had something to deliver, and were the only people that seemed to actually serve a purpose and get something done. You pick something up in one town, and drop it off in another. He knew he could never be one himself. He imagined carrying that load around would feel a little like being pregnant. He wouldn’t want to give the things away.

In the restaurant, the radio was always tuned to country, and Toby had to specifically tell Henry to turn it down. It wasn’t necessarily the volume that annoyed Toby, but the fact that if the music was ignored and the few morning customers continued on with their conversations, Henry would start
dancing. And when Henry started dancing, it was very difficult to get Henry to stop dancing. Toby had unfortunately seen this occurrence at its peak when he walked in on a slow day to find Henry dancing on the table top, fully outfitted in cowboy attire and howling violently. From then on, and for the next three months, he insisted on being referred to as "Hoss." Experimentation was not to be taken lightly.

Bysche was reciting "And One For My Dame" when Toby interrupted.
"So what exactly are we doing here, huh?"
Bysche looked shocked. "We’re drinking coffee. What did you think we were doing, knitting scarves?"
"I thought..." Toby’s thoughts trailed off. He poked the coffee with his red straw and achingly looked out the window.

There was a tiny man, not yet seventy, crouched outside, peering in at him. He had a scrunched-in sort of face and a slack jaw and it looked as if he was about to do something unexpected. As he gently kneeled closer to Toby, almost to the point where he was totally hunchbacked, Toby noticed that his purple tie clung to his neck like a sloth against a tree.

The man walked off and Toby shuddered. He looked down and realized his coffee had spilled on the counter and leaked onto his pants.

I’m always spilling everything, he thought. I can never keep anything contained. And therein lay the issue, I need to figure out what to contain and what to keep--

"Wow!"
--what to keep hidden. It’s all in moderation, the balance, keeping every detail in perfect place.
"Here’s some napkins. I’d let you wash off in the bathroom, but Lucy’s on strike."
"So she’s not cleaning the bathrooms?"
"No, that’s where she’s picketing. It’s doing a hell of a job to my business. You walk into a bathroom and find an old woman crouched in the corner as soon as you shut the door, and you’re bound not to come back to this place."

A distant voice yelled out, "Damn straight!" and Henry pointed at the Men’s Room.
There was a certain air in the restaurant that day, something quite peculiar that seemed to resonate among its customers. Was it a faulty coffee mug, a draft? A white floor of fog lingered about the floor and walking through it, Toby felt colder than he had been in the longest time.

A moment of reflection was taking a nap on Bysche. It sat upon his shoulder and wrinkled his lapel. The three were like sitting ducks at the coffee house; blasted conversation dominates everything. Why is it wrong to be quiet? Is there a penalty for not filling the air with words, even if it is babble? Toby felt as mute as a ceremony of Advent. Catholics, the Ratisons would gather around four candles, three purple and one pink, and one of them, either Toby or his sister Lisa or maybe even Timmy, would either laugh, sneeze, or cough, invariably snuffing out one of the candles in the process. More often than not, their Christmas tree would spontaneously combust. Toby’s mother asserted that it was because of their manners during holy services. From a young age, Toby had been taught that Jesus was very serious. He thought it might be a little harrowing to have to be that serious all the time. He’d end up bursting out laughing once he hopped into bed, or madly howling in the shower where no one could hear him. It was Toby’s belief that wonderful things should not be hidden.

As the elderly blue sun leaned into the clouds, dotting them with purple liver spots, Toby glanced at his watch. Nine fifteen. He would have to get back home soon, maybe he could sleep, maybe he could take a nap and wake up around noon, spend the rest of the day doing something productive. Aware that he had not lifted his eyes from the table until now, he looked to his right to find Bysche picking his nose. Toby always appreciated Bysche’s articulate use of his fingers. He could have been a concert pianist; he was very precise.

"I think I’m going to leave now, Bysche," Toby declared, and hopping up from the seat, he laid a tip on the counter for Henry.

"So tonight, then? Toby? You’ll be here tonight?"

He was already out the door.

***

Unfortunately, Toby had been so wound up in his own thoughts that he hadn’t heard exactly what his friend expected him to do that night. It most
likely had to do with drinking coffee, but he could never be sure. He had known Bysche long enough to know that he always seemed to do the unexpected.

Having no idea what to anticipate, at about six o’clock in the evening, he shut his tiny door and ventured from his little brown house to the coffee shop, hoping to find them there. Bysche was there, in fact, and so was Elizabeth, although she was asleep. Her head nestled upon her chubby arms and with her light blond hair and her long white shirt, she looked rather like a round apple without its skin, rolling back and forth across the table.

As soon as Toby walked in, Bysche jerked up, his bloodshot eyes squinting at Toby.

"We’ve been waiting here nearly an hour. We were about to leave."

Stuffing a Kleenex into his shirtpocket, he nudged Elizabeth. Her thick eyelashes blinked wildly and she came awake, giving Toby an evil look.

"Be a little earlier, please. You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting. I have some coffee brewing at home. It’s French roast."

Toby nodded. With his head down, he approached Bysche, careful not to make any sudden movements.

"So," Toby muttered under his breath, "we were going to..."


"Alright, enough. I’ve had a tough day. If you want to go to the carnival, we’d better hurry."

Elizabeth grabbed her army green colored jacket and jammed the cigarette she was smoking into the volcanic ashtray. Slamming her purse upon the counter, she struck the bench and swung the handbag over her shoulder. Toby, startled, held her hand and she eventually settled down. He knew what day it was. He knew it must be hard.

Toby had been with Elizabeth for a year and a half, and he had yet to meet her father. He often wondered what he was like; Elizabeth didn’t discuss him as much as she gave elusive clues, enough to let him form an opinion after months of casual discussion. A characteristic of constricted
conversation is that it seems to tie itself together in a knot. Elizabeth was wary of discussing her childhood, a car that always seemed to drive on the wrong side of the road.

A rather extroverted child, Elizabeth made many attempts at getting attention, especially from her father.

"He seemed so out of reach."

She recalled a time when she declared to Mrs. Sunkle and the rest of her second grade class that she had formally changed her name to Diana. Hamilton was highly interested in astronomical proportions. Elizabeth spent the bulk of her life trying to become her father’s moon.

Toby remembered the night, one year ago, when Elizabeth tried to call her father on his birthday. His girlfriend answered the phone in a husky voice, and Elizabeth, shaking and shivering and weak as a mouse, quickly let go of the receiver. Toby spent the rest of the night holding her and reading "The Little Prince." She laid her head on his stomach and nodded off.

"I love you, Toby," he remembered her saying, just as she was falling asleep. "I’ve never said ‘I love you’ to anyone before. Nobody’s ever said it to me."

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"Clutch first!"

"What!"

"You’re driving off the blasted road! You’re going to break my car! I hope you have insurance! No!"

It is an underestimate to say that Elizabeth was not the world’s best driver. She hugged the road as if it were her best friend, half of the car on the highway pavement and half down by the trees, toppling over dead raccoons. The only thing that could reasonably compare to the experience of being in a car with Elizabeth was a thrill ride at the fair a couple of years ago called "Kamikaze." This lovely machine sent its passengers up, down, and sideways until everyone boarding eventually lost his or her sense of hearing and motor skills. It was disassembled and declared a hazard after Walter Bell claimed it had jolted him sterile. Elizabeth’s driving was equally disturbing.

As Toby glared out the window, the fair came closer and closer into
view. It seemed much more elaborate close up than it appeared to be at the careful distance of the restaurant. Green and blue pulsating lights decorated the entrance. The town had chosen them because they represented the patriotism of the town, and the recent economic boom, which had won the envy of local communities. Blue and green lights were also on sale at the Safeway.

There was an overweight man taking tickets at the entrance. He needed a shave and smelled of sauerkraut.

As the three paid for their tickets and marched through the turnstile, Toby looked up to see that a fireworks display was beginning. Taking Elizabeth by the arm, he led her to the fountain where onlookers gathered to view the hot, sparkling spectrum of lights. Bysche trotted along after them, an amused grin on his coffee-stained face.

Blues exploded, reds climaxed, yellows shined. The dampness in the air made the explosions even more fantastic and seemed to douse the atmosphere in a thick coat of heat. As many rockets blazed and flew into the sky, Elizabeth kneeled into Toby, who responded by rubbing her chin. Bysche responded in a negative manner; it was like watching a romance movie. Sickeningly sweet.

The crowd cheered. There were many gathered there on the last Saturday of the carnival, families of eight or nine conglomerating and pretending to be of equal mind. There was a hint of sarcasm in the event, the fact that it seemed unreal, as reluctant teenagers pretended to scoff at their unruly parents winning prizes for their younger brothers and sisters, the feel of authority, its overwhelming impression shooting itself like a spire across the dartboard; a hit, a miss, a bull’s eye on the panel of time.

As the display ended and many families spaced out across the lawn, Toby and Elizabeth reverted into the disclosed corner of the park. Hoping to find a shortcut, Bysche pushed past them in a vague attempt to display his expertise. The full moon hung in the sky like an interference.

After walking for a bit of time, Elizabeth and Toby came upon the Game lane, where games of chance and skill lined the street generously. As the two entered the main area of the quarter, they spied a game of darts: quick, comforting, and easy to conquer. There was little or no skill involved...
in this, which was why it was the first one Toby chose to win Elizabeth a prize.

He quickly took hold of her hairy arm and made a beeline for a glowing orange stand. The man handling the tickets was at least twice Toby’s age, he was a stranger but also oddly familiar. Although his hair was gray, his black moustache seemed quite peculiar against stone-colored skin; this made Toby uneasy and he nervously handed the man a wrinkled one-dollar bill. The old man swooped it up in one dashing, forward movement that surprised Toby so that tiny goosebumps billowed up from his flesh like a thousand mushrooms. He became even more reserved when the man handed him the silver dart.

It was enormous and felt heavy as a cannonball in his sweaty hand. One wrong motion and it would cut his flesh into even slices of meat. Drawing back the blade, he weakly flung the metal upon the red and black dartboard which seemed hundreds of feet away.

It barely touched the circle.

The old man hopped out of his enclosure and stepped towards Toby. Taking Toby’s forearm, he placed it further back, leaning his elbow against his chest. "Try standing this way. And shimmy a little closer to the board."

Toby, a little embarrassed, obeyed.

Trying a second time, he leaned his right foot into the spongy grass. It bounced upon the blades, and he began to lose his grip on the ground. He quickly lunged the second dart forward as if it were a shot-put. This time it came closer, so that it gently petted the board.

"One more."

Sweating profusely now, Toby gathered his strength and looked at Elizabeth, who was at the petting zoo. He giggled, released the third dart, and resumed staring at her, with a smile.

He squinted his eyes and peered at the dartboard, noticing a huge dart poking directly from the centre.

"And he wins!"

Flushing, Toby was filled with pride. He gallantly trotted up to the booth, and grabbed a tiny blue bear with "Honore County Fair 2000" printed in large, bleeding letters, and handed it to Elizabeth, who smiled at her
decidedly talented Toby.

The old man put up a sign saying, "Game closed. Come back tomorrow." He was out of sight.

Walking down the unlit street as the fair came to an end, Toby nuzzled Elizabeth, placing his head on her rounded shoulder. Crickets chirped loudly in the distance; they were everywhere.

"What was the line in that Snodgrass poem... Heart’s Needle..."
"What?" Toby was staring at the moon.

"W.D. Snodgrass... There was a line in his poem. About crickets."

Toby recalled as much of the poem as his clumsy mind would allow. He thought for a moment. "Oh!" He recited, "I’m told a friend’s child cried because a cricket, who had minstrelled every night outside her window, died."

"That was it." Elizabeth smiled. She glanced at her watch. Panicked, she suddenly realized--

"Toby, where’s Bysche?"

Part Three: Sugar and Crème

A dear friend. A humorous companion. Gone in a flash? Hardly. Even Toby could not deny that he doubted Bysche had disappeared, believed he would come back soon. Bysche was a lot like a cat who would wander from home and return the next day, often with a dead bird in his mouth. He believed Bysche would be back as soon as possible. He really did.

Toby had a particularly difficult time sleeping that night. A bunch of thoughts ran through his head, what if this, what if that. He reminded himself that Bysche was not a child, that if he wanted to leave the fair, he had every right to and he and Elizabeth need not be alarmed. But he wondered how, if he did go home, the car he so cautiously entrusted to Elizabeth, his car, could still be in the parking lot. He wondered why, if Bysche was home, he didn’t break into his house, as he did nearly every morning, and how Bysche could so quickly and slyly slip between their fingers. They cared
about him. He hadn’t ever told him that. It had always been implied.

The coffee house was a mess on Monday morning. Henry hadn’t cleaned. Slouching, he leaned upon the counter and waited for Bysche. A constant customer, Henry often expected Bysche’s arrival before the restaurant would open for early bird specials at six a.m. Henry started sweating. It was noon.

"I don’t know where he could have gone," Toby asserted. "He was following us. He really was."

"Maybe he is playing a joke, dear," Elizabeth commented to Henry, who at this point seemed very alarmed. She held his hand as he leaned his heavy head upon her shoulder.

There were many new customers in the store that day. Those who had heard rumors of a frequent customer lost, and wanted to be seen in such an infamous establishment. For once, Henry was getting customers.

The damp, wet weather was hanging on the rack. Bugs clung to the windowsills, trying to coerce their way inside. Normally this would have bothered Henry and he would have covered the area with a thick coat of bug spray, but today he simply watched the bugs as if they were a tiny motion picture. He itched at the four mosquito bites poking out of his arm, looking like white pinpoints on his tanned skin. Scratching deep, he had to draw blood before getting any relief. Glaring out the window, everything seemed to move in slow motion, obnoxiously before him.

Elizabeth and Toby had to take up serving the customers. After years of going to the coffee house, one would think that Toby would be capable of making a goddamn cup of cappuccino. But the golden machine sputtered lazily and Toby panicked his way through four or five cups of coffee, served fresh on sticky, flowery plates. Elizabeth had trouble with her balance.

The day ended like it began, Henry still sitting in his stool and Elizabeth and Toby on their feet.

"Thank you," Henry smiled. "I was hoping you’d help me, I’m a wreck." His mouth was wide open, clean as a cat’s.

"Don’t worry about it, Henry," Toby said, and patted him on his chubby back, his hand rubbing the thick flesh upon his shoulders.

Hoping that maybe Bysche was at his house, Toby and Elizabeth got
in the car and Toby gave her the directions to his home. Already emotionally bereft, they carefully eased up the driveway. Bysche lived on Vernon Street, an unfamiliar, strange dead end avenue where most of the purple, dilapidated houses were occupied by Eastern European gypsies. Toby often dreaded visiting Bysche here because it was so odd to talk to him. The environment of the coffee house seemed so relaxed. To see Bysche in his domestic element, full of poets, gypsies and gun-toting drug dealers was simply odd.

Peering out the window, Toby glared at a couple walking down the sidewalk, a cane in each quivering right hand. They seemed to take each step painfully, each movement of the knee a difficult maneuver. Bending by the waist, the old man adjusted his glasses and peered at Toby just enough to make him wonder. The couple resumed their exaggerated walk and continued onwards towards the rail.

Emerging from the car, Toby placed his feet on the ground and pulled himself up. The murky surroundings and unpleasant smell lingered and made him sick, as Elizabeth walked him up the stone steps and knocked on a weak door.

No answer.

Turning the knob, Elizabeth pulled hard enough to tear it off. Beginning to whimper, she attempted to place it back in its original position but it seemed much too large for the hole. She dropped the rusty contraption.

"What are we going to do now?" Toby whimpered.

Elizabeth raised her bow leg and heroically shoved it into the door, causing it to collapse with a loud clunk.

She smiled. "That’s what we’ll do."

Toby turned solemn after peering in.

It had been January since he had last been in Bysche’s house. Eager to see his friend’s new abode, he speedily drove up to the establishment only to find Bysche asleep in his bed. Apparently it was quite easy for Bysche to forget when people would arrive, so that it did not necessarily alarm Toby when he was not in his kitchen, lazily sucking on a coffee bean.

As Toby and Elizabeth mechanically made their way up the stairs, Toby paused at a collection of stinkbugs and their pitifully slow movements in a broken corner of the house, assimilating into one large, terrifying
creature. He closed his eyes and turned away, and continued up the staircase.

Bysche was not in his bed. He was not in the kitchen. He was not in the bathroom (which was the first place they ought to have looked). With a desperate look in his eye, Toby descended the staircase in the same brutal manner in which he had ascended. Tired, he hugged Elizabeth, running his hands through her stringy, unbearable hair.

She whispered, "This is probably not the best time to tell you you’re being interviewed."

***

Toby blinked. "What? When? Where? Oh my, how could you!"

"It’s in an hour. A man from The Honore Times stopped by the restaurant while you were in the loo. He offered lots of money, Toby, I couldn’t have let you say no."

"Elizabeth, this is an outrage! How dare you!"

"He only wants to talk about Bysche for a bit! It’s going to be a lovely, emotional piece with as little bombast as the town press will allow."

Without staying to hear another word, Toby dashed out of the house, running as fast as he could, as fast as his swollen legs would carry him. He ran down Vernon Street, past the poets and the gypsies and the twenty-somethings selling bags of blow. He sprinted past the carnival, or what remained of it, the ferris wheel disassembled and looking like a terrible machine. He jogged past Henry’s Restaurant, eyeing the reporters. Elizabeth had lied. There were dozens of men in tweed suits waiting for Toby to enter the establishment so that they could attack him like pit bulls, fresh for a fight. Henry, grinning a fake grin and serving coffee to the malevolent men, must have been in on this as well. Feeling betrayed, Toby sunk his heels deeper into the ground and darted past it all.

The road was becoming bare as a Van Doesburg painting, and Toby’s gait became slower as he moved along the gravel. Swinging his arms in the air, he was tired as a dog. Staring up into the sky, he shouted out into an empty horizon.

He collapsed immediately after.

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There was a sudden spurt of energy -- which way, this way? The confusion had caused Toby to pirouette in circles, unaware of where the emotion would lead him. All he knew was that he was being led somewhere -- like a misshapen magnet, teasing at its course, hideously asymmetric. Exhausted, his feet seemed to move by themselves, first the left and then the right, sometimes overlapping and leaving boot-shaped prints in the mud. He simply followed them, followed them anywhere because the actual destination was not as important as this journey and its indecisive pivots.

One of the more remarkable things was the color of the sky. Its streamlined shape resembled that of a rainbow trout, the spiky clouds like scales on the horizon. At dusk, the trees swayed cautiously in the open and terrified field, the grass keeping still as if in a state of ignorance. As Toby wandered for minutes or hours, his legs becoming weak from the trip, he opened his eyes (his eyes were closed, did he want to see where he was going?) to find that his feet had stopped moving and he was standing at the front door of a rather large green house.

"This is odd," he thought, and looked at his watch and noticed that it had stopped. He figured it must have been after he left Bysche’s house, it was working alright on the drive. Cautiously, Toby walked closer to the house, until his pointy nose was this close to touching the chipped wood of the doorway.

He looked around to notice that the house was in the middle of a treeless field, no one in sight. This frightened him. Not only had he never seen the house, but the eerie surroundings only added to his anticipation. Why had his feet led him here? Was it only psychological, could he really be so drawn? His terrible ache for Bysche overpowered his fear of the bizarre landscape, caked in suspense, and without thinking, he quickly forced his hand to knock on the door, three separate times.

A slight bolt of happiness shot through him when he realized that there was no one answering the door and the house must be abandoned. But this feeling was quickly thwarted when he could see the small body of an old man, fourteen shades of white through the dirty screen.

"Hello," Toby said, surprised. "I’ve lost my way and I was
wondering if you could give me some solid directions. I’ve collapsed and am a bit ill and in desperate need of an indication as to where I am."

"Of course," he said. "Come in."

The entry reminded him of his grandmother’s house. He enjoyed those long summers in Ohio, each day like a drop of sand sliding down the hourglass. He noticed that even the wallpaper was similar, green vertical stripes with mint leaves, very old fashioned, very grandmother. He smirked at the white bedpan situated in the corner of the room.

Glaring up at the old man, he could see him more closely than he had in previous instances. He was set aback. He looked so completely familiar, like some long unmentioned connection was swimming up to surface. A few seconds later, the details clicked in his head so quickly that he hopped a bit, then reverted to ground position, slightly ashamed.

"You’re the man," he said, with a proud recognition, "who was working at the fair. I won a bear from you for my girlfriend!"

The old man smiled. "Yes, I worked there this summer. I don’t get out much while I’m here, you know, and so I thought it might help me out. I was very surprised by your technique and approach; I remember you."

Approaching Toby, the old man smiled delicately and placed his three fingers on Toby’s arm.

"I’d like to show you something I’m just so proud of."

The man slowly led Toby into an open room. Following a white, fluorescent light, Toby reluctantly followed the man; he seemed paramount and engaged.

He was in awe. The room was a radiant green from a distance, but until this time he had thought the green came from some artificial device. The room, the side of a classroom, was filled with plants. On the desk, scientific devices such as microscopes, periodic tables, and counters were arranged neatly around a giant pitcher plant. A slice of bog laurel sat expectantly on a chair, the spongy xerophyte dripping with cold water, smelling like shrimp. Snakes and bugs lay foetus-style inside yellowing formaldehyde tubes, growing cold.

Toby’s mouth opened. "You’ve got some place here."

The man blushed. "It’s just a hobby of mine, like a book that never
reads to the end. I enjoy science, I should think that’s obvious. I’m highly interested in astronomical proportions."

Stepping back, Toby clumsily knocked over a metal table and the papers that it held. The man, unaware, helped him up and helped him clean himself. Trying to appear composed, he touched a coarse, thick-leafed plant that seemed to be set aback.

"That’s my dieffenbachia," he noted. "Quite an interesting subject. In fact, recent studies have found that it has quite an interesting characteristic."

"W...w...what would that characteristic be?"

The man smiled. "Two dieffenbachia plants were planted together, adjacent, in the same pot of soil. Each of the plants had electric devices attached to them. Apparently this tropical plant emits very tiny waves of energy. These devices measured these waves and after careful study were placed at a neutral point. One of the plants was taken out of its soil, and mutilated in front of the other plant. For the next few days, students monitored the remaining dieffenbachia’s emitted waves."

Toby, half-listening, noticed something quite peculiar on the desk. A pack of Marlboro cigarettes lay there, but seemed out of place. He doubted the man smoked, and the pack was so dubiously distorted that it resembled a trash bag. Hamilton went on.

"The first lab student walked in, and the waves that the remaining plant emitted appeared normal. There was little or no change."

Toby, only barely listening with the funnel of his outer ear, saw that on the other side of the room lay Bysche’s trademark coffee mug, tall, overflowing, and unemptied. Or, it looked like Bysche’s. He was becoming very uneasy.

"The second student measures the emitted waves. They are normal. The class is becoming irritable; confused."

Heart rapidly beating, he continued to search the room, silently pleading for the old man to finish his blasted conversation so that he could continue to look for clues in this frightening diorama.

"Until the third student comes in: the same student that mutilated the first plant. The dieffenbachia waves start going out of control, there is a
noticeable change. The plant could sense its demise, could sense that something was wrong. He could sense his friend’s departure. And so you see…"

Toby had collapsed again. Maybe forever.

Epilogue

"Get me a cup of black coffee, Henry." Toby stared out the window at the lack of customers. It surprised him how quickly sensationalism died down, like a mayfly in the August heat. Cupping his hands around the mug, he sipped the bitter liquid, guzzling it down.

Elizabeth sat adjacent to him. Leaning into the counter, she toyed with a purple umbrella drink decoration. It floated inside the exilier like a tiny boatman searching for a raft.

Bysche had returned last night. No one was yet aware. He crept back into his tiny house, half expecting some soul to be there in the darkness, waiting to hold him. He arrived to darkness, and nothing else, set himself down on the mattress, and fell asleep. The brisk eye of morning did not wake him as it usually did. He slept a long time, suffering through dream after dream of replay. It made him cry. He slept so long that he did not arrive at the coffee house until three in the afternoon.

As the little bells rang in the doorway, Henry turned his head to see a round, shaking man step over the threshold. "I’d like a cup of decaf," he requested.

Henry smiled, and commented, teasingly, "Well, you sure are playing it safe."

The young man grinned, and placed a tall mug on the table. "I’m only being cautious, that’s all."