

LAURA ROCK

## Moving

“WHO ARE YOU NOW, Robin?”  
He pulls the long blonde wig over his crew cut and fixes the strands around his face. Then he tugs his jeans down below his hipbones, exposing a strip of white skin. The jump rope is the microphone, one wooden handle pressed into Robin’s lips as he puts on a show in our back laneway.

“I said, who are you?”

Robin stops dancing and opens his eyes. “I’m Avril.”

“Here, be Britney.” I put sunglasses on him and buckle him into the shiny pink bra stolen from our sister Katelyn’s underwear drawer. He ties a turquoise beach towel around his waist for a skirt then shimmies experimentally.

“Catch,” I say, throwing the plastic doll to him.

“Baby,” he says. He hugs it close.

“Baby Sean. Take good care of him.”

He tucks the doll under his arm and shimmies some more, turning circles in the weeds at the edge of the pavement.

“How does it look?” he says.

“Girl, you look *good!*”

Robin smiles with such pure joy that I have to laugh at him. At him, not with him, but he can’t tell the difference. For now, we’re feeling up. We cut out of school this afternoon and no one’s telling us what to do and even though it’s fall, it feels like the ice-cream truck will be driving up our street any minute, bell ringing. We both dance, singing and spinning until we fall down. It’s hard to catch our breath for laughing.

“Krystal! Robin! Get home!”

“Mom,” says Robin. By the dreamy look on his face, you’d think she was singing a lullaby, not shrieking our names up and down Alton Avenue.

“We’re supposed to call her Linda, remember?” I reach for a stone and am pleased to see it fly a good distance down the lane that runs behind the houses on our block.

“Linda.” Robin’s forehead is scrunched up. It’s no use with that slow brain of his. I roll our playthings into the beach towel. We start toward home, not hurrying.

Personally, I couldn’t care less what we call her. I may not be in high school like Katelyn, but eleven is old enough to understand some things. There’s going to be a new baby—Linda says she’s giving the mother game one more shot, with Troy this time instead of Dad. Tomorrow we’re leaving our semi on Alton, moving to a bigger place further out with cheaper rent. Still Toronto, but it might as well be Saskatchewan. I’ll have to figure everything out again: the best corner store, the streetcar stop, the laundromat, new people. School I’ve already figured out—it’ll bite. My shadow-boy guarantees that.

We trudge down the lane, passing Joe and Elaine’s backyard. Joe’s bent over one of his cars, a paint-spattered rag hanging out of his pocket. He waves.

“Everything packed?”

“Nah, nothing’s packed,” I say. “She’s freaking out.”

Robin’s fascinated by the rag. He reaches over to touch it, but I slap his hand away.

Joe doesn’t mind.

“Come see us before you go. Don’t forget.”

He’s alright, that guy. Most of the people around here are alright, because this is a sweet place.

Our street has swimming, skating, hanging around the park, whatever we want. We had a wading pool when I was little, until the city put in an icy splashpad that looks fun but isn’t. They’re building them everywhere, because you can’t drown in a shower, can you? I heard about a girl last summer though, the one who got her mouth stuck in the splashpad drain and ended up with bruised fish-lips. Way embarrassing.

We pass Anisa’s yard, where a fence is slowly going up. Joe works on it Sundays, along with the old Chinese guy whose house backs onto the lane across from Anisa’s. The Chinese guy doesn’t speak English, and Joe sure doesn’t speak Chinese, so they never talk. You see them working, handing each other tools and pointing, like mimes with no makeup. They must be psychic.

Then Anisa will come out carrying drinks, and she’ll talk loudly while they smile and sip. Anisa’s long flowy dress reminds me of a jewel-coloured kite fluttering in the breeze. If she sees Robin and me, she’ll insist

on feeding us. She'll go on about her fence: the wood so free of knots, the perfectly straight posts, the privacy she'll soon have thanks to her excellent gentlemen neighbours.

"Chivalry lives, Krystal," she said not long ago, winking. "Contrary to our own experience with men."

Usually I have an answer for everything—just ask Linda. But that day I popped Anisa's funny sweets into my mouth and chewed like it was a full-time job.

"Have another ladoo," she said. "*You* certainly won't get fat." She sighed over the plate of golden yellow balls but didn't take a second one herself.

We get to our own back fence. There's no gate, but it's no problem because we've bent permanent toeholds in the chain-link. As we go inside, Robin bangs the screen door into the lawn chair. It tips over, dumping a loaded ashtray onto the stoop.

"Idiot!" I say, before I can stop myself. Robin bites his lower lip. That makes me feel worse than if he fought back. Then he starts his hand-rubbing thing, which gets on my last nerve. He won't stop until he has something to hold, so I throw the beach towel at him.

Lately I think it's hopeless. I'm a year younger. Just a kid, not someone's mother and father rolled together. How am I supposed to protect him all day long from the ones who want to chase after him and yell fag? And there's a lot worse out there; I see the news. Robin trusts everyone.



Inside the house, there's nowhere to sit. The living room is full of boxes and piles of clothes. Linda stands over them, but she's watching her blaring TV show. She glances at us, then turns back to Montel Williams over in the corner. He's refereeing a shouting match between two stepmothers and the ungrateful girl they took turns raising.

"Where the hell have you kids been?" She looks like she's been crying again, but her puffy eyes could be water retention. Babies cause that.

"In the neighbourhood," I answer.

"Playing singer girls," Robin says, giggling.

Linda glares at me. "Why'd you let him do that?"

"Do what?"

"You know, act like a girl."

"It's just a game."

"He's not a little kid anymore. What if someone . . ."

“No one sees us in the lane, Linda. It’s a hideout,” I say, clearing space on the kitchen counter to make bologna sandwiches. “From you,” I mutter under my breath.

“I’m not raising no lane-rats.” She looks at Robin and frowns. “We’ll be packing all night to get out of here.”

“Where’s Troy?” I ask.

“This isn’t his junk to move.”

Troy started dropping by last spring after Dad left to go out west. He and Dad drove tow trucks together.

Troy doesn’t pay attention to Robin. Which is a relief, because Dad never could stop. If he caught Robin playing with one of my dolls, he’d throw it away and make sure Robin saw him. I lost a good pair of patent-leather shoes that way, cute ones with sequins on the strap.

You know how they always say it’s not the kids’ fault when parents split up? That’s crap. We know it was Robin’s fault. Not that he did anything, but he was the reason. Dad said he didn’t want any Barbie-boys. Linda fought for Robin back then, but now she doesn’t know what to do with him either. The special classes aren’t making him any smarter, and he hasn’t outgrown playing with girly things yet.

I give Robin a sandwich and take one myself. Linda circles the room, picking up the odd item and throwing it into a box. Nothing seems to be more important than any other thing. We watch her and eat our sandwiches standing up.

There’s no point asking Robin to help pack.

“Want to play with my troll babies?” I say. “You can.”

He nods happily and begins placing the trolls around his bed, grouping them into little troll families according to the colour of their whooshed-up hair.

I throw stuff into a box: perfume, my Avril CDs, and a few orange leaves from the park, not yet crumbling. A postcard from Dad, the only one he sent from British Columbia. It’s creased from Robin holding it so much.

Robin falls asleep on the bed, and I pat the blanket around him. He murmurs, but no real words come. I throw the trolls into the box and write “R & K” on top in marker.

I’m not sleepy but there’s nothing else to do, so I get into bed too. I pull the covers close and look out the window. The wind whips leaves around the back laneway as darkness slowly settles over and into everything: our street, our house, this room, our bodies, all washed away in the dark. I try to imagine the person who will be watching our lane from this very window, after we leave tomorrow. But I can’t decide if it’s a boy or girl; I keep

flipping back and forth. Maybe I should leave a note. Except what would it say—take care of our cracked patch of concrete? How lame is that?

It's still night time when I'm instantly awake dripping sweat. Four-thirty by the glowing alarm clock. I dreamed that we were swimming at Ashbridge's Bay. No one else was around. It was windy like November, and the water was really moving. We counted to three and ran in, splashing and freezing and laughing. But then Robin's hands were tangled in my hair as we scraped the sandy bottom, our legs scissoring the water. I couldn't swim to the surface. He was too big to carry that way.

I take deep breaths and try to calm down. Too bad I woke up so soon. Someone might have been coming to rescue us.

My eyes are still adjusting to the darkness. I have to look at Robin's bed twice before I realize it's empty. The wig is spread across his pillow. The doll is next to it swaddled in the beach towel, face down. And he's not there. Shit, he's always there.

I walk downstairs looking for him, flip the basement light on and worry for a moment about the centipedes. But down I go anyway, then right back upstairs to check the other bedrooms. Katelyn is snoring, mouth wide open. Robin is nowhere.

I open Linda's door and listen.

"Robin?"

Linda rolls over. Troy is up on his elbow, squinting.

"What," he says, "*What?*" as if I've been bugging them all night.

"Robin. He's gone."

"He can't be."

"He is."

"Go away."

"But—"

"Whatever it is can wait until morning."

"Linda," I say, louder now.

"Out."

I slam the door and walk away. Linda mumbles, and Troy shushes her gently.

My throat aches from fighting tears, but part of me is numb. The part that kept hoping we could be a normal family, with parents who decide things.

Back in our bedroom I unwrap the baby doll and hold him close. Then I put the wig on his bald head. I stroke the long strands, pulling them around the body. The wig smells musty, but it will keep the chill off.

Nothing is clear out in the laneway except the watery circle of yellow around the streetlight. For one odd second I feel a flicker of relief: Robin's

left home and that's the end of it, goodbye. I'm so tired. But then shame rushes in with fear right behind it. He's out there crouched in some shadowy corner, cold and scared.

All I want is to fall into Robin's rumpled sheets and cry my own storm. But I have to go out looking. There's no other way.



I scabble in the shoe pile and jam my bare feet into a pair of runners before slamming the door hard to warn whatever might be outside that I'm coming. I haven't got a clue where to start looking but head toward the lights on Dundas. It's creepy without traffic, too quiet.

In my head I play out possibilities. Robin wandering the streets lost. Someone jumping him for money, or for something worse. Hit by a car. No pleasant choices spring to mind.

I jump when a skinny guy in a leather jacket turns off a side street. He keeps on walking, but calls "Go home, babygirl," as he passes by. When I turn to make sure he's gone, the first silver light is streaking the grey sky behind me. This day is coming fast, like all days that you dread. Moving Day, hooray.

Bautiste Convenience is open all night and there's Mr. Bautiste behind the counter reading the Sun. He smiles. "My beauty-of-dawn, shouldn't you be home in bed?"

I hug myself, wishing I could hide my wrinkled PJs.

"I'm looking for my brother," I say. "Robin. You know?"

"He was heading toward the park."

"Thanks, Mr. B," I shout on my way out.

I cut back, jogging. The park seems to be pushing up out of the misty shadows: the ball fields snugged up to Greenwood Avenue, the empty playground, the dog-running area where owners yell "he's friendly" at each other like some magic charm. On our side of the park, Chinese grandmothers stand in the wet grass doing their Tai Chi. They move together slowly as if following silent orders. They could be dancers floating through water. I want to float along with them, melt into their changing shape and forget about everything.

But I can't see Robin anywhere. Even though the air is fresh and sharp, my chest feels tight. One of the Tai Chi ladies breaks formation, looks at me and points north, toward the pool. She jabs her finger in the air several times as if to say *go that way, go now*. She's smiling, but it's a tiny smile, not happy. I feel like I could almost hug her, but instead I just nod and run in the direction she showed me.

The pool hasn't been drained yet; the water is glassy and still smells of chlorine. We were swimming here last week. Thousands of kids splashed around us, but we didn't play their games. We stayed together.

I circle behind the change rooms to the path, where you can watch swimmers through the tall chain-link fence. A sagging concrete wall is pushed into the hillside along the path, overgrown with weeds and scrub trees. Broken glass and garbage are scattered around.

I stop short when I see him.

Robin is sitting on the wall staring at the pool, legs dangling. His eyes are sleepy, kind of dazed. He doesn't look afraid, but empty somehow. He turns toward me, and I see a line of dried blood running from his eyebrow down to his cheekbone. His shirt is ripped at the shoulder.

Every part of me is shaking from the morning chill or leftover panic or relief; I'm not sure which. I rub my hands together, try to get a grip.

Finding my brother this way, seeing his skinny body again, it hits me all at once how he's mine. My problem that will never go away, even when we're grown-ups. It's like someone kicking me in the gut; I look around for a place to throw up. But then my stomach settles down and I can swallow again.

Who knows why I was the one chosen for him? No one else but me. The only sure thing is that I'm choosing him, too. I could sneak away, but I never will.

"What are you doing, Robin? Did you fall down?" I reach out to touch his cheek, which is swelling up, but he tilts back out of my reach. "That doesn't look deep. It'll heal in no time."

He grabs my hand and looks at me hard, like he's trying to figure something out. Then he gives up.

"I want to swim," he says. "swim, swim, swimming," in sing-song, head bobbing in a way that reminds me of him twirling around the lane.

I pull him off the wall, shaking my head no.

"Let's get out of here. No one knows where you are."

He squeezes my hand and tugs, his eyes pleading.

I look at the water and shiver. Then I smile at him, and he giggles.

Cold and stupid, that's what this is. I can't think about getting caught.

It won't matter anyway, after we move.

We strip down to our underwear and charge the fence. We're over the top fast and quiet, the way spies would do it.

"Who are we?" Robin says as we climb down the other side.

"Soldiers," I say. "Let's be soldiers."

He nods and crouches low, aiming his pretend rifle from side to side, looking for the enemy. We inch forward. At the edge of the pool we whisper-count to three and jump, holding in our screams.

Just before hitting the water I think of the Tai Chi ladies surprised by splashing sounds. I know they'll creep closer to check on us, like silent army buddies on the move. Together they'll glide into a new position and cover us until we're standing outside the fence again.