

LIZ WINDHORST HARMER

THIS GREAT EXPERIMENT

HALF THE TIME, Greg felt like puking. It was seasickness, he thought, and now he was thinking about it constantly, about how the road was so much like the sea. When Jayde was driving, the RV always seemed about to pitch. He had considered weight distribution; he didn't know whether compensations should be made for the lean of the road, or how to account for the air in the tires, and the way Fire was stomping around in the back was not helping things. Anyway, she had no respect for any request of his; when he did finally get her to sit at the table reading *1984* or, recently, *Lord of the Flies*, afterwards he would be heaving in the bathroom from the exertion, the prodding, convincing, confusing work of manipulating an eleven-year-old.

Even when it wasn't moving, the RV's instability was a problem. If Jayde was unable to sleep and crawled out of their bunk to sit in the driver's bucket seat to read, he felt her footfalls in his gut. His body was a pool and the slightest movement filled it with rippling.

Sometimes it was he who couldn't sleep. Their breathing was still alien, heavy and wet. There was a smell of compost and ash. The vinyl ceiling was too close to his nose, so he clambered out over Jayde's body with the dwindling bag of pot. Sitting outside on a rock or against a tree or even lying down on the grass while he rolled a joint on his tummy like an otter: this was the only thing that worked. He got high, the nausea disappeared, the sky was black or perfect with stars, the wind was cool, this tree had been growing for dozens of years, this rock had been here for millions, and that starlight would outlive them all.

He'd gotten two tick bites this way. Jayde liked to wrap her legs around him from behind, to massage his neck and shoulders and comb over his skin with her fingers. "Oh," she said the first time, with the glee of a collector. "Fire, come look at this."

Fire walked over, her expression unchanged. "What?"

“What?” Greg asked.

“It’s a tick,” Jayde said, her fingernails pinching. Greg tried squirming away from her. “Greg, stop. Stop. I’ll get it out. Don’t worry.”

He tried to relax. Fire went into the RV to find her wildlife identification book, and Jayde called after her for the tweezers.

“No, you can’t just pull it out,” Greg said, trying to reach his hands around to feel for himself. “You’ll detach its body, but its head will get stuck.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Jayde said, continuing to pinch with her long nails. “Oh, I think I’ve got it.”

“I’m going to get Lyme disease,” Greg moaned, blindly patting at the spot with his fingers.

“Relax. You’ll be fine.”

“But there is such a thing. Lyme disease can kill you.”

“Fire! Get the homeopathy book, too!”

They could hear her clunking around the RV in her father’s too-big workboots, which she rarely took off. Jayde stopped working the spot with her fingernails, and Greg could hear the digital camera chime. She was taking pictures.

“Is it a bull’s-eye?” Fire asked, peeking her head out.

“What do you mean?” Jayde said.

“What do you mean, what does she mean? Does the bite look like a bull’s-eye?” Greg said.

“Oh, oh, I don’t know. Oh, look,” she said. “I think I’ve got it.”

Later, when he went inside to examine the spot using a complicated arrangement of mirrors in the tiny bathroom, he saw nothing on his back. There was no tick, no bull’s-eye, nothing but the jab-marks where Jade’s nails had sunk into his flesh. It was the same way the next time: his panic, her certainty, the tick easily sliding out.

“That’s the way it always is,” Jayde said. “Fear-mongering, just like with sharks. Did you know that sharks are the gentlest creatures known to man?”

“That’s not true, is it?” Greg said. “What about mice? What about koala bears?”

“Koala bears can be quite vicious,” Fire said, looking up from *Brave New World*.

“I didn’t say ‘most benign,’” Jayde said. “Mice are small but not gentle.”

“They eat their young,” Fire said.

“Didn’t I tell you about the time we swam with sharks? Remember that, Fire?”

“Off Fiji, with Dad.”

“You swam with sharks?” Greg asked.

“So we know for a fact that the stereotype has no basis in reality,” Jayde said.

Every few days they would leave their campsite to find food and a wireless connection. Jayde’s blog was called “Infinity in One Hundred Square Feet,” by which she meant that they had nothing but freedom even though they had nothing but freedom. Sometimes she posted photos of them with people they met on the road. There was Douglas, a cyclist from the UK who played chess with Fire. There were Samantha and Rob, two surfer-snowboarders who, for their honeymoon, were camping across Canada. Jayde often wrote about folks like this, but didn’t mention the families car-camping with portable DVD players, or the groups of Scouts driven in from nearby towns for camp-outs. She blogged about the difficulty of living without a fixed address, about eating well without appliances, and about getting along in a tiny space. She listed the supplies they’d run out of, books Fire was reading, and free outings for unschooled children. She linked to like-minded websites like “Radical Parenting 101,” “Mutiny in the Commune,” and “Life without Limits.”

Greg hated the blog, but at the moment it was their only potential source of income. Right now they couldn’t even afford a smart phone. She wrote about him frequently. She had dubbed him “Big G,” while Fire was called “PeaPod.” She referred to herself as “MamaNatura.” She wrote that “Big G had given up being a corporate drone,” that they’d “fallen in love with each other and the open road,” that he was “unjobbing,” “trusting the universe to provide his livelihood,” and “loved being part of this great experiment.” “Big G loves animals, MamaNatura, PeaPod, learning, questioning, and nights under the stars,” is what she’d written on her “About” page.

One thing he missed was shopping. Before meeting Jayde at the library in Toronto, he had lived with a series of girlfriends, all the same type. Sarah and then Karen, elementary school teachers, were followed by Christina, a librarian. After he and his friends graduated from university, everyone settled down and learned the domestic arts: his girlfriends liked to get their hair

done, indulged in finer and finer wines, taught themselves to make flan and pad Thai. They discovered good restaurants. They saved for a down payment.

Greg missed the shopping so much that, while Jayde was blogging and Fire was curled up in the library reading, he drove the RV around whichever town or city they'd found, looking for malls or antique furniture shops. He imagined lying down in the beds on the second floor of Sears like some enormous Goldilocks, stowing himself away in an armoire.

He'd hated his job, hated the desk he sat at every day answering emails and spitting out proposals or rewrites of other people's spin on environmental issues. He'd felt dirtied by it then, but now he missed it all: his cubicle, the hodgepodge of mugs in the break room, the constantly ringing phones. All of that stuff had anchored him. Everything he had was now measured out in bills. There was him; there was his cash. They'd used a bunch of it to buy the RV, and the rest was being nibbled up by gas and pot and cheap books.

Jayde had convinced him that most married people knew less about each other than the two of them did. Still, she refused to tell him about Fire's father, letting those clomping boots stand in as angry, jealous ghosts. He tried to make a case for having bank accounts, or time spent alone in which he and Jayde could get to know each other, or for refusing to share their food and pot with everybody who asked. But when he raised these concerns they were somehow flattened out by Jayde's quick-flying opinions and Fire's sad, judging eyes.

The plan had been to see as much of Canada as they could and to blog about it. He was supposed to start his own blog or to guest-blog for Jayde, but the thought of doing that, like everything else, made him sick. For a month Fire had made them stop at every bridge so she could sketch it, and then she'd lost interest in that and was focused now on digging Penguin classics out of bargain bins at used bookstores. She also liked to make bird feeders from old pop bottles, and they left one of these—suet-coated and filled with seed—at each of their campsites. It was their signature, Jayde said. A piece of garbage hanging from a tree.

In the middle of the night when he nursed his highs, feeling the tree roots beneath him and thinking how like human legs they were, he would be staggered by thoughts of the future, by that length of unknown, uninhabited space that lay terrible before them. He had done the same thing on the balcony of his apartment. He had blown smoke into city nights, feeling superior to the white cotton sheets of the bedroom inside and to the endless cycle of

cars in the street. The lights going yellow, red, green, yellow, red, green and the wide-open eyes of car headlights.

He and Christina had not been hurtling, but crawling, punctuating their existence with the HBO shows they watched and reading reviews of condominium floor plans in the Saturday paper. Eventually there would be babies to fit into that life, and the idea saddened him, miniature versions of their parents, amusing themselves with cartoon characters and plastic building blocks.

He'd seen Jayde at one of the computers after meeting Christina for lunch at the library, and she'd met his eyes, grinning as if she knew something he did not. And when he took her home and into his bed, she was so unlike any girl he'd known, with tan lines and dirty fingernails and frizzy dreadlocks to her waist and unshaven legs and a musky nest of hair under each armpit. While she gathered her things afterwards, trying to get dressed, he became desperate.

"Stay," he said.

"Don't you have to go to work or something?" She went into the kitchen and patted her crotch and armpits with his baking soda.

"Fuck work," Greg said.

She smiled at him and pulled her t-shirt down.

"Can I call you?"

"I don't have a phone."

"What?" Greg dropped to his knees when she got to the door. "I want to see you again. You can move in here."

She laughed. "Here?"

She'd come back twice more, at his insistence, during those brief mid-day hours when Fire was learning to knit and bake with her grandmother. He thought he was in love with her. She had tattoos that tucked around her wrists and thighs like vines, spelling things out in Latin and Greek that she would not translate for him, and, despite her tough appearance, she had that same teacherly quality of his other girlfriends. He could picture her crouching down to hear him out, and then gently prodding him in her direction.

After the third time they'd had sex, he didn't see her for a few weeks. The cleanliness of the apartment began to chafe at him. The Clorox under the sink was sending clouds of poison into the air, which he couldn't escape even if they went radically green. Even if they transformed into hippies like

Jayde, the building was stacked with condos filled with poisons, bleaches, perfumes and air fresheners. He snapped at Christina one morning when she was coating her armpits with deodorant.

“That’s filled with aluminium, you know.”

She looked at him, still stupidly applying the white stick.

“You’re using too much. It causes Alzheimer’s. Cancer.”

“Everything causes cancer.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“What’s going on with you? Are you okay?”

He shook his head, too angry to speak. It was a death trap and he didn’t love her. He went into his office, but felt that he was nearly absent; voices had an echoing quality, faces seemed large and looming. The unreality of modern life, he said to himself. The great fiction. While he was in this state, she arrived at his cubicle, wearing a sundress and flip-flops and smelling strongly of herself.

“I have a proposal for you,” she said. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

“There isn’t enough to do,” Greg said, stoned and hungry after a dinner of lentils cooked into a soup with a bay leaf and two cans of vegetable broth. Jayde was taking pictures of the soup pot over the fire for “Three Simple Ingredients,” the title of one section of the blog.

“What do you mean?” she said, her eye on the camera.

“If you’re bored it’s because you’re boring,” Fire said.

“I am bored,” Greg said, putting a spoonful in his mouth.

“But what do you want to do?” Jayde said. “We’ll find a way to do it.”

He got up and went to the opposite side of the RV and puked onto the grass. Then he took a swig of water from one of their glass jugs, wiped his mouth, and returned to the fire.

“This happens to everyone,” Jayde said. “You’re homesick. It happens to everyone.”

“But homesickness doesn’t actually make you sick,” Greg said. “I’m sick. I’m literally sick.”

“Fire, get my homeopathy book,” Jayde said, and the girl got up to fetch it.

“You’re being metaphorical. You don’t know the difference,” Greg said. “It’s like dying of a broken heart. That doesn’t actually happen.”

Jayde nodded vigorously. “That does happen! People do!”

A man called Smith who was living under a tarp in the next campsite walked over, crunching leaves and sitting down in Fire's chair. "Mind if I join you?"

"Smith, Greg doesn't think it's possible to die of a broken heart," Jayde said.

Smith gave him a solemn nod. "My grandpa did. Right after my grandma died, he had a heart attack. He'd been in perfect health right before."

Greg swallowed another spoonful. "I just don't know where we're going. We're just driving around. Kingston, Barrie, what's the point?"

Jayde smiled at him patiently. "All that's happening is that you're confronting this for the first time. This is reality. Nobody knows where they're going."

He shook his head, stood up and swerved, still hungry, but nauseated by the pot of swirling, tasteless lentils.

"You've never been to the prairies. I don't know, where should we go?" The cheer was always in her voice. Fire clomped out through the side door. "Get a map, Fire. Let's choose a place. We could move to the ocean. You could learn to build boats."

"I used to build cars from scrap metal," Smith said, playing with his beard and looking into the fire.

Greg nodded, breathed in, breathed out.

"You've been like an addict," Jayde said. "You're still detoxing."

He nodded again, slowed his breathing. The darkening of twilight was like a garage door inching closed. He shut his eyes and saw the beach, himself building a boat, sanding the wood, brushing red paint on its underbelly, sand dusty on his feet. The wind would whip against his linen clothing and behind him there would be the million miles of ocean, the rush and suck of waves, flowing, ebbing, rushing, sucking. Himself sanding, the sand on his feet, the rushes of water, the slosh of paint.

He held his hand against his mouth and ran behind the RV, bent over his own heaving gut.

"I could have sworn there was a treatment for homesickness, here," Jayde said when he returned, paging through her homeopathy book. "I would have bet you anything."