

Standing Still In A Moving World



A collection of short stories about moving forward, by Huan M. Nguyen

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Kylee](#)

[Last Call](#)

[Standing Still In A Moving World](#)

[Return](#)

[Free](#)

STANDING STILL IN
A MOVING WORLD

Huan M. Nguyen

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Thank you to every person that has helped to make this collection possible.

Thank you to the teachers who encouraged my writing. Ms Jones, I never did finish that story to enter in the Maximum Ride competition. But, your willingness to help me and the knowledge you displayed started an inspiration that has stayed with me. Dr. Giovanelli, your understanding and compassion during my first semester as a freshman also gave me inspiration, and hope to make a better future.

Thank you to Kea Pene, for reading and so enthusiastically supporting my writing, time and again. I appreciate your cheers so much.

And, thank you to my parents. To Dad, who started something when he handed me my first Redwall book. To Mom, who gave me support in everything I did, even when I worried her. I wrote this sitting down and not moving at dangerous speeds, so I hope you find some relief in that!

Thank you, reader; I hope you enjoy what you find here.

Kylee

She woke with her face pressed to the carpet.

Groggy, a glance at the clock told Kylee that it was 1:36 in the afternoon, and she had gone to bed at... what time? Four?

She pushed herself up and shook her head. Another day. The roomed seemed dark for early afternoon in April. Crossing the section of her apartment in a few short strides, she yanked the blinds up. Dark grey clouds and patters of rain greeted her coolly.

Sighing, Kylee turned to the doorway of her bedroom to prepare for work.

It turned out to be a long shift.

Sighing, Kylee turned to the doorway of her bedroom to

decompress from work.

Drained of energy by demanding eaters and drunk patrons, worn out from dealing with a harassing manager, she grasped her shoes and pulled. They landed one after another in the corner of the room, and Kylee dropped onto her bed, wishing that she had taken up the cute bicycle messenger's offer of company for the night.

One in the morning, and Kylee lay awake in work clothes, wondering what would have been if

she...

She still could. The determination hit her in the darkness as the pounding of rain intensified on the roof.

There was always community college, right? She could go back. If that wasn't her cup of tea, then there was always the chance she could take on doing something on her own. Then there was the gym she'd been meaning to go to, promising herself at the beginning of every month that this time she'd do it.

It was definitely going to be different this time, Kylee promised herself. At the age of twenty-three, she had time. Didn't she?

Two in the morning came and went as Kylee hopped onto her laptop and looked up the requirements of the local community college. Not too bad. She could definitely do it. Two years didn't seem so bad, and maybe then she could finish her four year at a state college nearby. She was still young enough to have some fun there too.

She'd do it. It was decided.

Impressed with her own motivation, Kylee dropped to the floor on impulse and decided to throw out a few pushups for the hell of it. It was going to be the start of her new life, after all.

She lay on her stomach between sets, deciding a break was in order. As her head tipped precariously on where it rested on her arm, threatening to fall to the floor, Kylee closed her eyes. Just a moment's rest and she'd be back at

it again. The clock on her nightstand read out 3:53.

She woke with her face pressed to the carpet.

Last Call

Richard stood transfixed for a heartbeat, then wrenched his gaze to the side. His voice, commendably, was just shy of even. "Julia..- How are you?"

A turquoise shimmer, the click

of heels against pavement. His eyes returned to the impeccably dressed woman after Ryan locked away the surprise he knew they'd shown. She moved closer and he made no move as a familiar perfume forced its way into his mind, listened closely as she spoke, "Richard, come on. It's not like we're just acquaintances."

They certainly weren't. He pushed off the wall and slid easily to stand before Julia with a lithe ease that very nearly concealed a stiffening of muscles, hand

outstretched. Richard returned her regal stare. "Poor manners. It's good to see you."

She gave him a look, lowered her eyelids, raised her eyebrows, tilted her head, haughty as he remembered. Rolled her eyes without rolling her eyes. She moved forward, noting the minute recoil Richard made as he fought the urge to keep the distance. He could not refuse the implicit gesture, and raised his arms. Julia pressed against him. "We're not shaking

hands. Really?"

She let go, though Richard noticed she remained standing intimately close. A light caress of his tie yanked his thoughts into the present. "You did great tonight. You and that professional. Her dress was pretty, wasn't it? She was... elegant."

"It was and she is. I hope you enjoyed yourself, maybe learned something interesting." His hands hung by his sides. Awkward, but then he'd rather they stay there than-

"I did. You both did great, the talk seemed like you were just conversing with the audience. It was natural." Julia's lips lifted, somewhere between a smile and a smirk. "Just like your hands on my waist. I liked when you held me like that."

Richard blinked. Julia's hands were resting on his chest, and her blue gaze brought out a tiny smile on his face for the past. Silence fell, gentler than the snow flecking his brown hair.

"I missed you, Richard."

And he could remember the taste of her lips as vividly as if she'd kissed him moments ago.

"Yeah. I missed you."

Julia's lips parted, a fraction of an inch farther apart. "I really missed you."

Richard summoned images of Tessa, their six year old son, a little home with a crackling fireplace. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. A pause. "It's been a long time, Julia."

Her lips pushed forward, tiny creases appearing on her forehead. The blue gaze sharpened at his implication that time should have smothered the blaze. He knew the unspoken words behind the half-pout, half-frown: Why aren't you flattered I've been thinking about you like this? "Richard..."

Sudden memories invaded Richard's mind, of James just two nights before. James, one hand with fingers curled loosely around a shot glass. James, his hollow voice

echoing the marriage that had ended in ugly divorce. "Richard, I just couldn't do it anymore. If... if she wanted me to be with her, I would be, in a heartbeat."

The specter of their last years in graduate school had come back to follow James. Or rather, it had never left. Richard's, however, stood clad in familiar perfume, a heart-stopping dress, immaculate blonde hair, and a tear-shaped diamond necklace less than nine inches from his eyes. Julia saw his

hazel eyes dilate, and her fingers tensed on his chest, unknowingly digging polished nails into the skin underneath.

Richard inhaled slowly, cursing her perfume, as he recalled his own reply to the unconscious form of his friend in the guest bed, across from his and Tessa's room. After carrying James up the stairs from the living room, he had deposited him onto the bed and sat down next to the slumbering man. He whispered, "Don't feel bad,

James. Maybe I would too."

* * *

The printer whirred and Mark grasped the last page in his hand, adding it to the small, neat stack. Padding softly through the door leading to the colossal backyard, Mark eased himself into his favorite chair by the firepit. A shot of whiskey and what felt like hours later, the back door slammed open and a squeal broke the silence.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

"Mom says it's time for

dinner." Ryan smiled wistfully. "I could totally go for roasting some hot dogs over that fire you've got going. It's summer and everything. This is the last summer before I go off to Nevada, you know."

"Eeeee!" Susanna, or 'Susie' for short ran at her father, who snatched her from the ground and lifted her into a hug, carrying the child as he strode towards the house.

Mark grinned at his seventeen year old son keeping pace with his

father. "Don't remind me Ryan. Yesterday you were eight and still wanted piggyback rides. But, we'll have a small family barbeque this weekend, how's that sound?"

"Like you don't want to eat my cooking, my heartless husband!" As always, Becki's voice lifted the corners of his mouth.

Lowering Susie gently into a chair, Mark spun and swept Becki into his arms, losing fifteen of his forty-four years. She rained kisses on his face and he squeezed her

lightly. "Only if you hadn't baked such delicious-smelling lasagna, honey."

She smacked his face with the back of her hand, which he caught and used to pull her into a kiss. Any retort of Becki's was lost. Ryan smiled indulgently as his hands mechanically set the table, his thoughts drifting toward Sarah, the girlfriend who had unfortunately been unable to attend dinner this evening. He might, however, be able to convince his parents into

inviting her for the barbeque... She was very fond of Susie, as well.

Mark, feeling carefree and like a weight had been lifted, kissed the back of a blushing Becki's hand before he turned his attention to the table, and took his seat. Family, lasagna, and good humor filled his mind, shoving all thoughts of a manuscript aside.

Out in the back, a stack of printer paper crumbled to ashes. Devoured by an insatiable flame, carefully trapped under the logs of

firewood, only the last page was visible, and only for a short time. It had fallen out and avoided the fate of inferno until the flames had consumed everything else, reaching towards it.

Julia sighed, knowing this would be the very last time. His fingers, from where they were running up and down the skin of her arms left exposed by the dress, dropped with his hands. "Richard, this is the very last time, isn't it."

Only he would catch the tiny

question mark at the end of her statement, Julia knew. A last grasp, a final clutch with a faint hope. A grasp as desperate as the way her hands shook before they were pressed against Richard's back.

A single drop struck Julia's back, and he released her. "The very last."

"You're a dick." Laughter threatened. The hot sensation in her eyes threatened something else, as did the catch in her throat. It was hard to breathe. She could

see Richard inhaling and exhaling just as shallowly, see a glimmer around his eyes, the single track on his cheek.

Julia's breathing hitched and she closed her eyes, shoulders trembling, fighting desperately to force back the sobs promising sweet oblivion.

"Goodbye, Julia."

Standing Still In A Moving World

She stumbled into her studio apartment, making her dizzy way to the bed in one corner. Gratefully, Anna collapsed on it, rolling

contentedly into the comforter. In her mind, conversations of the night replayed.

"Hey, Anna!"

"Hello, John. How's your invention thingy coming?". Anna squashed onto the seat of the booth. Beside her, John grinned. "Quite well. I've run into a few bugs that need ironing out before I can move on, but it's ever so close to being finished."

"Good. Now where are those drinks you promised us?" She

winked at him, and he smiled good-naturedly.

"They're coming."

The night began to blur as the alcohol took hold, and only snippets of conversation and flashes of excitement stood out in her mind...

* * *

Anna shot upright in bed, mind hazy, and fumbled around for the source of the buzzing. Grabbing her phone, she swiped the screen and flopped back down, bringing the phone to her ear blearily. "Hello?"

She winced as the receiver blared with Izzy's voice. "ANNA! You've got to come out to lunch with me, I have the most *wonderful* news and you won't believe it, let's meet at the Chestnut Cafe in half an hour?"

Smiling at the speed of her best friend's delivery, cringing at the volume, Anna agreed and hung up. She lay unmoving for a minute, then mustered the effort to pull herself out of bed and stagger to the bathroom.

"So what's this wonderful news?" Anna slid into a chair, sweeping brown tresses back over her shoulder with one hand.

Izzy leaned towards her, a brilliant smile lighting up her face. "I've been brought on to ImagiPlanet!"

Anna's blank face must have given her away. Izzy sighed exasperatedly. "You know, the animation studio that does all the cute children's animated movies? We saw that one with the two

princesses last week!"

The recognition struck Anna and she gave a sincere smile. "Izzy, that's wonderful! It's exactly what you've always dreamed of!"

"I've been waiting so long for it, and it's finally here!" Izzy giggled delightedly.

"Maybe if you weren't spending so much of that time goofing off drawing..."

It was a tease, if not an outright lie. Anna knew that Izzy had been hard at work for years,

working at the Chestnut Cafe by day, and spending most evenings and some nights refining her skills, or working on projects with independent artists and studios.

"Izzy...?" Anna watched as the diminutive blonde's eyes tracked something behind her, then flashed back to Anna and widened.

"Oh gosh, did you hear about Robert?" Izzy didn't wait for an answer, plowing on excitedly. "He was on the news this morning!"

"We all know he worked on

the president's campaign." Anna tried to be gentle, but it was old news that everyone had heard. Multiple times.

But Izzy was shaking her head determinedly. "No, not that! He was interviewed on the morning report as part of his bid for mayor!"

Anna sucked in a breath. "Okay, that's new. Good on him though. He's the youngest person to run in, like, a billion years!"

"Right? It's wonderful, and-"
Whatever Izzy was going to

say, was interrupted by the arrival of the manager, a slim, severe-looking man who Anna knew to be a most kindhearted person underneath. "Izzy, could you possibly start your shift a couple hours early? A small party wants to have a little get-together here, and Rosa had to leave a few minutes ago."

Not one to refuse the manager who had taken a chance on hiring an inexperienced Izzy, Anna knew, her friend slid her chair back and

gathered her things. Anna took the chance to inquire about Rosa, whom she had only met twice. "Is she okay?"

Steven gave her a small smile. "Yes, she's just feeling under the weather. Izzy, you know how Rosa is. She's determined, but I determined she looked a little green to be working for too long."

Izzy grinned, and leaned over to hug Anna. "That's right. Thank you for meeting me, Anna. I just had to share with you how amazing this

was!"

"I was glad to come. Bye Steven!"

Steven diverted his attention long enough to incline his head at her, then went straight back to discussing the upcoming party with Izzy. "They're coming in about an hour and a half, so..."

His voice was lost as Anna moved away. Before she got to her car, she looked down the street and noticed a sign hanging just a few doors down. The local bar and

restaurant, and her favorite place for a good lunchtime sandwich.

Why not, she thought, maybe Mike will be working too.

She pushed open the door, and took a seat at her favorite table, noting how empty the place was. Soon enough, a server came to take her order. "What'll it be, Miss Anna?"

Anna smiled at the young man. He seemed quite young, but had proven himself an able server for all the times she had eaten here.

"The Cuban. And call me Anna, you know I've been here much too often for all this Miss. Makes me sound old as shit."

He blinked, then grinned.

"You're above twenty, so you are."

"Oh, get out of here and get my food!" Anna laughed as he made to walk away. "Wait, is Mike working now? He wouldn't pass up a chance to serve his dear old friend, would he?"

The server merely smiled, as a voice made its owner heard

across the room.

"You'll have to order a drink for that, Miss Anna."

She whipped around to see her ex-boyfriend leaning at the bar, with his head propped up on one arm. He winked. She smiled widely and said to the server, "Can you bring my food to the bar?"

"Will do." He threw over his shoulder.

Anna walked regally to the bar, adopting a haughty air. Mike grinned and tilted his head. "Come

to grace my bar with your presence, princess?"

The old pet name no longer held the heartbreak it had. Now, it echoed in Anna's ears with the feeling of laughter that Mike seemed to always carry with him. "Of course, Mike."

"Well, it's good to see you." There was a genuine smile on his face, now free of the vindictiveness and temper that had twisted it before.

"So when did 'the bar' become

'my bar'? Anna plopped her chin into her hand, resting her arm on the smooth wood.

Mike smiled wider under her inquisitive gaze. Pride touching his voice, he said, "Owner came in one night, which is rare 'cause he usually comes in the mornings once a week, on a random weekday. He saw me working and said I was the 'most effusive server here'. Then he flagged down the old barman Tom during a lull and told him I was to train as a bartender, 'effective

immediately'."

Anna grinned. The owner of the place had a reputation for being almost robotically formal in his speech, as well as very eloquent at the same time. "So here you are."

"So here I am." Mike agreed. He glanced over her shoulder. "Looks like your food's here."

The server set it down in front of Anna, who thanked him and picked up the silverware he laid out next to the food. As she dug in, Mike favored her with a smile and

turned to prepping the bar, carrying on a one-sided conversation to occupy both of them as he did so.

"The first few nights were tough. Tom isn't the type to take it easy on you. He said that I would work the next week as a server, and handed me his black book to study. Did you know lots of barmen have them as a sort of personal bible they write drinks down in? Once I saw how old and quality the leather was, as well as the pages and the handwritten notes, I realized how

much of a treasure it was. Had to study it for that week and have a few of the more popular ones memorized, as well as the normal menu. Then he threw me in the deep end, and..."

Anna's mind wandered, still half-listening to Mike as she methodically disappeared the food on her plate. Mike's movements had become easier and more confident, more expressive. She knew it would never work again, and hadn't in the first place. But as she gazed

unconsciously at Mike, her heart squirmed just a little.

"... Anna?"

She started, blinking at Mike.

He seemed to know what was on her mind and his tongue darted out to wet his lips. The silence hung awkwardly for a second, then Anna ducked back to her plate, which was nearly empty, face burning.

Mike must have been just as taken aback, but he picked up gamely. "So you're going to Nathan and Tessa's wedding next week,

right?"

Grateful for the conversation, she pushed her empty plate away and swallowed the last bit of food before answering. "Yeah. It's about time! We've told them, they've acted like they were married since early high school."

He grinned knowingly. "Save me a dance?"

Anna smiled back. "Of course."

Their gazes locked, and she dropped hers. Raising it again,

Anna saw Mike's tightened lips, and his quick glance towards her plate. "... Done already? I'll take the dish back, no worries."

She knew the unspoken implication in his question. "Yeah. I have to go, finish running some errands today. It was good to catch up with you. See you next week!"

Mike leaned forward to collect her utensils, and Anna placed a quick peck on his cheek unthinkingly. She retreated hastily, watching Mike's eyes widen and his

lips part before he regained his composure and raised his guarded eyes. "Looking forward to it."

Anna fled.

Once safely in the car, she began to think aloud. "Why did I act so crazy? Oh god, Mike and I were just getting better too, things were starting to not be awkward anymore. And why did I lie to him? I don't have squat to do today, I'm going home now in the early afternoon to my cat. That sounds crazy... I'll be that cat lady, I know

it."

Her mood steadily worsened as she drove home, and by the time Anna pulled into the driveway of the small house she rented, the monologue was a full blown rant. "I just realized! Everyone seems to be moving on, doing something in the world. John's working on a new invention that seems like it's going to be hugely popular. Izzy got brought on board to a prestigious studio, Robert's running for mayor and most likely going to win,

Mike... Well. Uh..."

A promotion to bartender hadn't seemed quite as noteworthy until she realized that no matter how over Mike she was, the knowledge of all the pretty girls he would be serving drinks to and flirting outrageously with wasn't pleasant. Anna shook her head forcefully. "And, Nathan and Tessa are finally tying the knot."

Stooping as she walked into the kitchen from the garage, Anna scooped up Frizz, the little orange

kitten that had come into her life just days prior. She kissed his head and set him down. Moving tiredly to her bedroom, she dropped onto the bed, legs hanging over the side. A small mewling sound caught her attention, as did a slight tugging of the sheets.

Anna sat up and laughed at the sight of little Frizz clutching onto the sheets, hanging by the tiny claws dug into the sheets he was attempting to climb. She wrapped a hand around him and lifted him onto the bed. She kicked off her shoes

and lay back, dropping an arm across her eyes. Frizz mewed and clambered up to curl up on her hair, purring rumbling in her ear.

Sleep carried her off, and Frizz's purrs faded into the sounds of her footsteps on a hardwood floor. Almost detachedly, Anna watched as her hand raised to brush its fingers along the spines of the books, some with fresh-looking dust jackets. It slid past the authors, in alphabetical order, past books thin and thick.

If she had been in control, Anna would have been surprised to see 'Anna Larson' on the spine of a medium-sized novel. As it was, she calmly watched her hand pull the book out, open up to a random page. The pages grew larger and larger until her vision blacked out, then reformed into a scene of... herself.

Anna's visible self had longer, messier hair, and somehow she knew that she was seeing herself late at night. Her doppelganger's keys clacked away at the keyboard

of a shiny laptop, the model that she'd been looking at to replace her failing one. The scene blurred and refocused. This time, it was afternoon. Anna's doppelganger came through the door of the kitchen and sat down at the desk. Her vision blurred, and when she could recognize what she was seeing, Anna knew it was the same scene, hours later.

Her copy wore the same clothes, just ruffled and her hair was falling out of its tight bun. A

cold mug of coffee sat on the desk, surrounded by scraps of paper with scrawled ideas and diagrams covering them.

The copy reached over to the desk light and flicked it off, plunging her into darkness. It resolved itself into the bookstore again, this time without her novel in her hand. Anna watched as he shook her hand, inviting her to a local, quaint cafe. Her dream-heart beat faster, and she struggled to stay calm and collected. She looked up

into his gaze, strangely seeing not his face, but only his blue eyes.

Anna dove into that blue like a pool, and emerged from the shower in her house. She walked into her bedroom, ignoring clothes and dripping water alike. A notebook open on her desk loomed into view, and she noted the list of marathon practice times, each decreasing or the distance increasing.

Almost as if she was experiencing her copy's feelings, Anna felt a muted, distant sense of

pride and confidence.

* * *

Anna sat up slowly, the corners of her lips lifting in anticipation, eyes shining with the same. Frizz climbed awkwardly into her lap, and she scratched his head for a second before setting him gently to the side.

The tiny orange kitten watched as she strode out of the bedroom, and closed his eyes to resume his nap.

Fifteen minutes later, he

watched as she darted into the shower, and then sat down at the keyboard with her favorite pen and notebook. Anna flipped open to a page written long ago; a page with three lines. The lines had been written as a germinating idea for a novel she'd had months ago. Mike had encouraged her to write it into existence.

Anna remembered waving him off with the rationale that she was no writer, had more practical things to do. She opened her word

processor and took up the pen. It scratched as she sketched out diagrams, plots, and characters.

She glanced over at Frizz; his eyes were slowly sinking, along with his fuzzy head. A small smile touched her lips.

The keyboard clacked away as Frizz drifted off.

* * *

Anna lowered the old cat into the ground. She was glad that this property had so much open space. Frizz deserved to rest in the space

that he had been so eager to explore when he was younger and fitter.

Tears splashed unheeded, soaking into the soil. Chase wrapped his arms around her and she sobbed into his chest. "I'll... I'll do it."

"Are you sure, love?" She felt the rumble in his chest, and it brought her comfort just as it had any other time in the past.

"Yeah. I mean... it's Frizz. Just- just give me some time. Take Sarah inside and I'll see you both in

a bit, okay?" Anna gave her eight year old daughter a watery smile, from the warm comfort of Chase's arms.

Her favorite daughter ("I'm your only daughter, Mommy!") patted her leg uncertainly, not quite understanding why Mommy was so sad, but not liking the sight.

Her beloved touches a gentle kiss to her forehead, and releases her. Chase scoops Sarah up. His words to her are lost on Anna.

As soon as Chase and Sarah

are inside, she collapses to her knees next to the small hole. The sobs shook her whole body, and Anna's fingers curled compulsively in the dirt, one hand clutching the shovel as if for dear life.

"You were there from the beginning, just a fluffy little thing, Frizz. You saw everything, kept me company. You nuzzled up to me and made me feel better when I cried over the first few rejection letters before I got more used to it. You were there after Brian dumped me

like the asshole he is. It took me weeks to really come around to that, you remember? Of course you do, you cheered me up every day.

"You listened patiently when my friends got tired of how I kept gushing about Chase, about how I totally thought he was the one and again when he proposed. He even took to you so well, and you'd spend just as much time in his lap, especially when you finally taught him where to scratch you. Oh, Frizz...

"You put up with baby Sarah even when you were too old and tired to do much else. You watched as I saw my friends move, and then as I took my first few steps too. I love you so much, cutie."

Anna stood and lifted the shovel. Holding back the tears proved to be too difficult, when she glanced into the grave. Frizz looked as if he was sleeping, one leg and paw resting atop the small stuffed mouse he used to play with. She attempted to swallow and failed.

Finally, Anna rolled the stone into place above the soil, and drew an arm across her eyes. "Thank you, Frizz. I'll come back, all the time, and I'll keep you updated so you're always there, like you were. I promise."

She dropped the shovel, and turned to the house. As she approached, fighting to regain control, she heard Chase's voice drifting out into the warm summer evening, reading the lines of a book. Anna knew the lines intimately; she

had spent hours agonizing about making them perfect.

"There was once a great orange tiger, and anybody who looked at him knew exactly which one he was. That tiger was the only one with such wild fur. He had had that crazy fur even when he was a kitten..."

Return

James Stetson treks along the side streets of his city, smoke trailing from the cigarette that dangles in the corner of his mouth. Snow crunches underneath his boots and the rhythmic, squeaking sound

soothes his mind.

His peace of mind is promptly upset when his boot slips out from underneath him and, with a curse, the cigarette falls out of his mouth and straight down into the snow. Catching his balance, James snorts in disgust. His hand drifts into a pocket, reaching for the pack, as he turns a corner into an alley.

A flash of color ahead of him catches James's attention, and as he approaches, it is revealed to be a child's coat. The coat belongs to a

boy, no older than eight years old, leaning backwards and straining to pull something with both his arms.

James's eyes follow the boy's arms down to his two hands, each tightly clutching the lapels of a man's jacket. The man is sitting with his legs out in front, leaning forward from the waist, and apparently only kept from slumping backwards by the child's efforts.

The boy is standing with a leg on each side of the man's straight legs, and James notices an empty

fifth of alcohol resting by the man's relaxed hand.

James's blond hair flicks up with the motion of his head, as the boy whimpers, "Daddy..."

Suddenly overcome, James's breathing hitches around the lump in his throat and his chest clenches. He pauses in his stride and shuts his eyes against the tide of emotion. When he cannot take the effort any longer, James approaches the two.

The boy looks up at him. James can see the desperation

shining in his eyes, and knows that it far outweighs any fear he might have of this looming stranger.

"Mister... help. My daddy..."

James speaks just enough to try and reassure the kid. "I'm James. I'll help you bring your daddy home, kid. Show me where you live."

It is all James can force out before his emotions set his lips in a tight line. The boy backs away as he reaches down and hoists the man onto his shoulder. James struggles with the dead weight, realizing the

father is unconscious. He grunts, and follows the boy as he scurries off.

A short walk later, James arrives at a tiny, shabby house surrounded by tiny, shabby houses. The boy opens the front door and holds it as James passes the threshold. James dumps the unconscious man into the nearest chair, and straightens up with a sigh of relief. He glances at the boy, who looks quite agitated. The realization that the longer he remains in the

house, the more unnerved the boy will become strikes James. He moves to exit the building, but the boy grabs at his sleeve.

Seemingly reassured by the willingness and purposefulness with which James made to leave, the boy looks up into James's eyes and shyly says, "Thank you, Mister James."

James blinks, and tries to bestow a soft smile on the boy as the child releases his sleeve and steps back. He pulls the door

securely shut behind him on the way out as his conscience nags him, telling him to go back and do more to help out.

He knows it is a bad idea. The moment the father woke up, James would scream at him the raw emotion James had never been able to express to his own father. He would say everything he had ever meant to say, and launch every imprecation at the boy's father.

So James continues forcing his feet along the path to his small

house. He stalks down the concrete, fighting the urge for a cigarette, a habit he picked up overseas on a photojournalism assignment.

It had been an assignment in France, covering the scandal of the undercover spy from the United Kingdom. The resultant stress from trying to keep up with the rapid French, the rude French authorities, and the rudeness delivered in rapid French by nationalistic journalists had convinced James to accept a cigarette offered by one of the few

kinder ones. When the buzz had cleared his head and put a new spring in his step, James decided he could not stop. The fact that his cravings gave him less patience and more vehemence in dealing with his nasty French counterparts was a bonus.

When he had arrived back in the States, James could not kick the habit. The number of cigarettes he smoked grew as his reputation in the field grew. The cigarettes become more numerous as he took

less pictures of the world in its glory, and more of the world in its ravaged landscape. Assignments and personal hunches led him to warzones, to the slums of the world, and memories of landscapes photographed and mountain ranges flown over faded.

James stumps up onto the porch of his house, and drops down onto the bench. He watches the snow swirling down and thinks that it is the holiday season after all. The tentative thought that maybe

after ten years... No, James decides, he cannot forgive.

The last time James saw him, Dad had hurled a bottle at him and told him to take his stupid camera and leave. James had done just that, and after a grueling year, had managed to eke out a living from his art. The time passed, and barely scraping by had turned into being comfortable. A couple years had gone by while James basked in the comfort, a comfort he proudly provided himself. Then the urge to

more had seized James, and in a fit of bravado, he'd had the company ship him off to halfway across the world.

The experience had been incredible, at first. Some of the photos that James had taken in the most exotic of places remained on his hard drive to this day, along with the backups of his current work, and portfolio. Cherry blossoms in Japan, snow covered Big Ben, camels along the crests of sand dunes, James had been to see

it. The insatiable taste for adventure grew, and he began taking on more and more dangerous assignments.

Riots in South America proved to be a harrowing experience, as well as capturing a soldier's last moments.

Sorrow and calm overcome James as he recalls that particular memory, and he grows pensive, offering up thanks and a silent prayer for the life lost.

His eyes clear, though the calm remains. James admits that it

is more than anger preventing him from reaching out to his estranged father. He has to admit to himself that it would crush him, if he were to contact Dad, and the latter were a raging alcoholic. Or worse...

James sits at the table in his house, sipping successive cups of hot wine for hours. His mind whirls in circles, circles that become more irregular as the alcohol sways his thoughts. When he does more dozing than thinking, James shakes himself and decides the time for bed is long

past.

The morning sunlight dazzles him as James yanks open the curtain in the morning. Sometime during the night, he has made the decision. He will go and see the old house, to see if his dad is still there. After that, and if he is, maybe he will be able to find his mom too.

It is unclear to James whether he wants his dad to still be there after all this time or not, and he wrestles with the question during the entirety of the two hour drive.

Finally, James pulls up to the modest two-story home in the neighborhood he grew up in. He maneuvers around an RV parked on the side of the road to find himself space to park, and his eyes widen as he realizes the RV is mostly inside the invisible line dividing the yards. His eyebrows lift as he exits the car and has the chance to examine the place.

The yard is trimmed and neat, the garage closed. James notes that the paint is fresher than paint of ten

years should be, and that the roof seems to be in a condition just as good.

With growing uncertainty, James approaches the door. He sees that it is nice on the eyes, frosted glass and all, and he wonders if his father has been long gone. The house of James's memory is dirty and unkempt, a stark contrast to the sight before his eyes.

James takes a deep breath and runs his hand through his hair. A moment more, and he pushes the

doorbell.

There is silence as his thoughts whirl around incessantly, and then his heart rate doubles at the sound of footfalls inside the house. James wets his lips nervously, and nearly startles at the sound of the lock being turned.

"James?!"

He is speechless. The woman who answered the door has gorgeous locks the exact color of his hair, and he can only squeeze out a single word in recognition of that.

"Mom?"

"James, honey..." The two are struck dumb momentarily.

He swallows and blinks. Then he does the only thing that makes sense to him and steps forward to embrace his mother.

Dorea Stetson wraps James in her arms, and the only thing keeping tears from her eyes is the massive shock at seeing him after ten years of life impressing changes upon her son's stature and his older expression.

"I... uh... I came here to talk to Dad. You know... How long it's been and all..." James trails off uncertainly when Dorea gives him a brief, unreadable look.

Then, a small, genuine smile lights up her face. Hesitantly, she looks back to the interior of the house. "It's one of your father's few regrets. He brings it up from time to time, the fact that he wishes he could speak with you and smooth things over."

Later on, James would say the

universe had been eavesdropping on their conversation. At the very end of his mother's sentence, Charles Stetson strides into view, starting a cheerful inquiry. "Dorea, who's..."

James can only stare at his father's shocked expression. He blinks again, and exhales slowly through his nose. His gaze is drawn to Charles's hand, which clutches a glass. A tiny smile involuntarily lifts James lips to note that Charles has seemingly rediscovered his

taste for lemonade, a drink James had seen much of, then much less as his father began drinking more.

"James..." Charles hesitantly moves forward, transferring his glass to his off-hand, and reaching out his right.

Galvanized by his name, James steps in closer and wraps his arms around his father, mindful of the glass of lemonade, and of the burning sensation in his eyes.

"Oh, James. I'm sorry." If the footsteps had been an indication,

Dorea had relieved Charles of his drink, because his father returned the tight embrace with both arms. In an absurd moment, James is glad that he doesn't feel a cascade of lemonade streaking down his back.

James steps back and holds his hand up warningly. "Dad... I don't..."

He can see the sudden worry reflected in both his parents' eyes, and he sighs. "How about we catch up, you tell me how everything's been going?"

Charles nods, examining James's face. "Sure, why not."

"Boys, you go have a seat and I'll bring out some snacks." Dorea smiles, and James knows that there will be time later for her to catch up as well. He watches as she wipes an eye and turns towards the kitchen.

His father leads him into the living room, where Charles drops into an armchair, and James perches himself on the couch.

Charles takes a deep breath,

and begins, "Well, you know how things came to a head when your mother left."

James nods, and steels himself to begin a difficult conversation with a most difficult topic.

"I let the grief and sadness and anger take over. Drinking became the way to get away from it all. And I'm sorry that it took me away from you, too, son."

Eyes averted, James can only grunt. The risk of his voice breaking is too high.

"And when you really began to have a passion for your photos... I thought... I thought they were beautiful art, James. But I was so scared. I was afraid that you wouldn't make it in art, and that a year's time would find you scraping by, or worse, on the streets."

James knows this is true. He would have been too prideful to return home after leaving the nest.

"So... it all came to that night." Charles looks away, and James is glad of the chance to take a deep

breath without being examined.

"I'm happy to say things took a turn for the better after that. Kind of, anyway. I missed you terribly."

James swallows, and forces the words out of his blocked throat. "I missed you too. And Mom. You know, I just really wanted... wanted everything to go back to before she left."

Charles gives a slight smile. "We'll get to that. I cleaned up a few months after you left. Got back to a respectable job, stopped drinking,

went to AA. And - ah, speak of the devil."

Dorea enters the room, and lowers a tray of sliced fruits onto the coffee table. "Here, boys. And what's this about a devil here?"

The smile on Charles's face widens as he continues, "Oh, just you. It must have been supernatural, some kind of miracle, James, because your mother came back to see how you were doing."

Dorea gives James a slightly teary smile. "I was worried sick

about you. Charles had told me about your passion for photography, and I shared his worries."

James gives a lopsided grin, and declares softly, "Well, I've got a lot to tell you about that. But that'll wait. Go on, Dad."

"That's really about all there is, James. It was tough to patch things up." Charles's face sobers as he looks at James. In a softer tone, he continues, "As I'm sure it will be for us."

James looks straight at his

father. "I know. But this is what I want, and I hope it's what you want. If it is, I think it'll be fine."

"Oh, James, honey!" Dorea envelops him in an embrace, and James has enough time to catch a glimpse of Charles closing his eyes with a smile.

Hours pass as the family integrates themselves once again, and eventually, James is standing just outside the door, with his parents in the doorway.

"I'll be back for Christmas

Eve dinner in a couple days, yes, Mom."

"Good. Now get yourself on home, James, you shouldn't be standing out in the cold like this."

James shakes his head fondly, and begins the walk to his car.

"Bye, Mom, Dad."

As he walks, James's lips lift in a smile that widens until it splits his face from ear to ear.

"And don't think I missed that pack of smokes in your pocket, young man!"

Free

I suppose I should tell you about me. Some stories drop you right in. Others have lots of exposition, where the characters are introduced by the sentence and have chapters devoted to their

backgrounds.

In this case, who I am is only mildly important. After all, there are eight billion people on this planet, nearly four hundred million in my country and about a hundred and fifty thousand in my city. The experiences of a guy living in Lowark, Idaho are a molecule in the massive baths I sometimes indulge in. Too much info? Let's back up then.

Physical qualities are easy to bring to mind. I'm about six foot

one, one-sixty. People describe my hair as 'sandy', or some other words I can't bring to mind, but I just like to say it's light. That's a quirk of mine. I like to make things simple as possible, when it's possible. Less trouble that way. That doesn't always work. Never works at work anyway, at the local bank. There's all these rules I gotta follow, and regulations that change every hour. But we make it through and I come home with money to live and do the things I love, so that's alright.

Life here in Lowark can sometimes get monotonous. That's when I know I haven't broken the routine enough, or tried anything new in the recent past. Those are the times when I go out and do something for the hell of it, something that feels unusual to me.

In this case, it was a children's animated movie. Something about a dragon, a baby serpent, and a girl that could speak to both. It was enjoyable. Definitely different from what I normally like

to watch. There was also that whole being-surrounded-by-children thing.

Honestly, that was much more enjoyable than I thought. Got me thinking about the future, about children. It was cute, hearing all the kids laughing and gasping. Except for that one boy throwing popcorn.

I picked a piece out of my hair, the other hand pushing the exit door open. Stepping through, I held it for a gaggle of kids streaming by, all chatting excitedly. It was an adorable sight. Then...

"Thanks." A perfunctory thank you for holding the door from a stranger. Except the stranger was an ex-girlfriend, Jackie, short for Jacqueline.

"Jackie?"

"Yes? Who... Oh! Jake!" The reticence in her eyes was perfectly natural. We didn't part horribly, but we didn't split up in a friendly manner either. "Uh... how are you?"

I blinked. "I'm fine."

Before I had the chance to elaborate, a tall, scruffy-looking guy

came through the door, my ex-girlfriend's name dropping from his mouth like breathing. "Jackie? Where'd you... Oh, hello."

I tried not to be too stung by the relief evident in Jackie's eyes as she quickly laid a hand on the man's arm. "Keith, this is an... old friend, Jake, from high school."

"Old friend? Well, it's nice to meet you, Jake." Keith's eyes told me he knew exactly what kind of friend I'd been, and I was happy to see warmth in them, even if the man

himself was a little reserved. It almost felt like he was judging me, taking the measure of the stranger. I shrugged mentally. It was what I would be doing in his place.

"Good to meet you as well, Keith." I pulled my pack out of my pocket, and a lighter out of another. "Smoke?"

Jackie daintily plucked one of the long, white cylinders from the offered pack, and Keith accepted one as well. I lit mine, then handed off the lighter. The smoke escaped

from my mouth, leaving behind a familiar taste as I turned slightly towards Jackie. "So how'd you guys meet?"

"We actually met in a... psychology class, I guess you could say. I'm studying to be a social worker, if you remember." I nodded at her, and she continued, still eyeing me with some reluctance. "Well, we were doing some sort of dialogue experiment, and I got paired up with Keith."

He broke in and picked up the

thread of the story, and I switched my attention to him. "And she was just enamored with my fantastic listening skills, knew we'd be perfect together."

"Better than us anyway."

Keith and I both turned slowly to Jackie, who flushed a brilliant pink. "Did I say that out loud?"

Both she and Keith eyed me warily, but strangely enough, I agreed with a small grin. "Seems like it, anyway."

Keith's eyebrows rose and

Jackie's eyes widened. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Her eyes flickered back and forth between mine, searchingly. A glance at Keith showed me a curious gaze, but one tinged with warmth. Looking back at Jackie, I shrugged and smiled openly.

Jackie smiled back, apparently having found in my eyes something she was satisfied with. With more openness than before, she said, "I'm glad you think so."

Keith stepped forward, hand

raised, and I grasped it. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Jake, but we have to leave."

"Are you jealous, Keith?

That's not like you!"

At Jackie's tease, he grinned and stepped even closer, wrapping a hand around my forearm. "Look at this, how could I not be jealous?"

Under the pretext of banter, he leaned in closer and whispered conspiratorially, "There's actually a surprise party for Jackie, and everyone's waiting."

I grinned at his sly wink, and Keith moved back to Jackie's side, giving her a disarming smile. "How do you feel about grabbing a drink with us sometime, Jake? Here, I'll write down my number for you. You two chat or something."

While Keith busied himself with the paper, Jackie turned a slightly suspicious eye on me. Clearly, she wanted to know what exactly had passed between me and Keith. I said hurriedly, "We'll grab drinks as long as there's no

cranberry and vodka."

She seemed somewhat at ease with our past now, and I held my breath, hoping a little inside joke from years ago wouldn't be taken badly. That time, we'd been at a party thrown by an old friend, a house party. Not unpredictably, we'd gotten hammered. Very much so.

"No, never again." Jackie's eyes crinkled, and I mentally sighed in relief. "That was something..."

I grinned at the memory. "I

couldn't smell vodka without getting nauseous for a while."

She smiled back. "I remember. Called you a pansy."

"You did!" Before my wounded pride could make itself known, Keith had come back, a folded piece of paper extended in his fingers.

"Here you go." He winked at me, and I knew the paper had more written on it than his name and number. "We're off now, it was nice meeting you, Jake!"

Jackie looked a little startled by how abruptly Keith took her arm and steered her away, but she waved at me and gave a small smile.

I unfolded the little paper curiously. The messy handwriting gave an address, and a message saying Keith would give me a head start, to park farther away, and that we would exchange actual numbers at the party.

The purr of the engine lulled me into thought as I wound my way

through the streets. Jackie's birthday was today. I had specifically avoided wishing her a happy one, because I had a hunch that the party was exactly for this occasion.

I arrived sooner than I realized, and strolled up to the dark house's door. A knock later, and a curious face peered around the door. "Who are you?"

"Keith gave me this address for Jackie's surprise party. Let me in, they'll be here any second now." Seemingly taken aback at my

peremptory tone, he stepped back, and I caught a glimpse of a couple familiar faces.

"Angel! Jason! It's good to see you." They smiled back at me, but it was Angel who responded, and in a manner that I'd always associated with her, no matter how long it had been. "Jake! Hurry up, hide!"

The man who had opened the door looked at me, shrugged, and retreated behind a nearby sofa. I darted into the kitchen, taking shelter behind the island.

Surprisingly, nobody had claimed the spot.

A clicking sound reached my ears as the door was unlocked, and there was a small flash of light as Jackie's rings appeared, fingers grasping the door. "Why is it so da-"

"SURPRISE!"

The lights flicked on and Jackie laughed happily as all the people stood up in concert. They all began calling out to her, the initial exclamation completed, laughing

and teasing.

Not five minutes later, the party was well underway, and it looked as if some of the guests were totally intent on blacking out. I chuckled at the sight of a group pounding shots like the apocalypse was impending, then turned towards the living room. Plopping down onto a couch, I shook Jason's hand. Past him, on the other side of the rather large room, I caught sight of Keith and Jackie in an armchair.

Jason grinned at me amusedly,

making me chortle. "She wanted to 'show him her gratitude'."

Suddenly, his face took on a solemn air, and he leaned in towards me. "How are you feeling about that?"

Startled, I paused. Layers upon layers. He was asking me out of concern for me. He was asking out of concern for how it might bring the party down if there was a jealousy fight. He was asking to protect Jackie - and by extension, Keith - from a potential threat.

I shrugged honestly. Looking at them, all I felt was a warm fondness, a strange nostalgia, and a slightly wistful longing for nobody in particular. I told him so.

Jason relaxed, and he leaned back against the other side of the couch.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Jake." Angel had appeared, standing behind the couch, though with an arm on it for balance.

"You're drunk, Angel." I smiled at her.

"No, really, Jake." Angel insisted. She opened her mouth, hiccuped, and then tried again.

"You... you weren't really the best together, to be honest..."

Jason was watching me guardedly. He had nothing to worry about, though. "I know, Angel. That's why I'm glad to see her happy like that."

Upon hearing my thoughts, Jason seemed to relax again, and Angel wound her way around the couch to bestow a hug on me. She

pushed a bottle into my hands as she stood up. "Here, Jake. I'm gonna go find Nate."

Without so much as a goodbye, she stumbled off. I assumed Nathan was her boyfriend, but turned an inquiring eyebrow on Jason. He nodded, rolling his eyes. "She's always like this when she's drunk. Give it a few minutes and you won't be able to pry her off him for the rest of the night."

I smiled.

We spent the rest of the

evening catching up, Jason spinning tales about this and that, and chatting with the drunken guests. A couple of hours later, the party showed no sign of slowing down. I noted with slight shock that the rooms had become even more crowded, and the kitchen was full of alcohol, almost literally.

Jason followed my line of sight, and chuckled. "You'll excuse me, Jake. I have something I need to do."

A knowing glance his way, I

stood up and stretched. "I'm heading out, anyway. I've had enough excitement for an evening."

"Pansy. Still scared of vodka." He mock-teased as he made his way to the kitchen. The last thing I heard from him as he disappeared into the throng of people was a shout.

"LET'S GET TRASHED!"

This garnered a massive cheer from the crowd, and I shook my head amusedly as the front door opened underneath my hand

Keith and Jackie were

standing outside, each smoking a cigarette. They stood alongside each other, their free hands intertwined. "Leaving already, Jake?"

I shook Keith's hand, and pulled Jackie into a hug. "Happy birthday, Jackie."

She patted my back in acknowledgment, and stepped back to let Keith offer me his phone. "Here, I'll call you when we go."

I dialed in my number, and he saved my information as I stepped

away. Jackie grabbed my hand.

"Wait, Jake."

Turning a questioning gaze on her, I stopped and turned. She reached up to kiss my cheek, then turned back to grasp Keith's hand again. They both smiled at me. Something blurred my vision, and I realized a snowflake had made a perfect landing in my eye. When had it started...?

I grinned back at the couple, then walked down the street as the snow intensified. It swirled freely

around the still air. On impulse, I stuck out my tongue and caught a few flakes. An inexplicably cheery mood had come over me.

The white flakes flowed off my windshield. My car sped through the night, and as my eyes adjusted to the faint glow from my dashboard, I smiled. For some reason, I felt like I was flying.