

A Good/Strange Thing

Leah De Forest

In fifteen minutes Alessa is going to die. Because of this her age is relevant. We measure our longevity against hers, weigh the level of tragedy. So young, but – her children no longer babies. So young, but – three years past forty.

Alessa is in a queue. The line is thick and hot with bodies; the sun merciless; the air full of loudspeaker cheer. *Comeonladies-andgentlemen-areyou-ready-toride!!* And whoosh-doof-doof. Alessa's bag contains a full day's worth of snacks (pretzel sticks, raisins, cereal bars), a water bottle for each child and her husband's Xanax. She has decided that they will have a good day: sweaty-smiling selfies for the holiday card, family in-jokes, a respite from the sense that the world out there is doomed, that they (as in they, them, us) have ruined everything.

'Hey, Mom.' This is Sophie, Alessa's eldest. She's just hit her growth spurt, all elbows and limbs, her nose too long for her face. 'Check out that woman, right? She just ate like five donuts. While standing in *line*.'

'Okay, Soph.' Alessa digs around in her bag. 'Are you telling me you're hungry? I have your pretzel sticks –'

'Ugh, *no*.' Sophie hugs her stomach. 'I couldn't possibly eat after seeing *that*.'

'Listen, Sophie. I don't think –' she looks around at the throng of baseball caps and tank tops, armpit hair, bellies. Her daughter's fine, fair hair. 'Just keep your voice down, all right?'

Alessa's smile touches only one cheek. The sun is warm, at least. Mark's hand pleasantly heavy on her shoulder, and Eve's swinging feet only mildly irritating. Thud. Thigh. Thwack. Eve is six and too big to be hanging off Mark's hip. But Eve understands the need for it, the way her weight helps her

father stand and breathe and see. Zac keeps himself off to the left, grinding the toe of his Converse into the crumbling pavement. He is unable to give even one tiny shit about how uneasy his father is. Alessa has tried explaining, neurochemistry and flight or fight, childhood trauma, that too, really, but Zac turns away or wrinkles his ten-year-old nose. He is a kind boy who loves his sisters, but he cannot stand weakness.

'So!' Alessa claps so enthusiastically that the short man to their right grabs his hat. 'Favourite thing so far?'

'Breakfast,' Zac says, flicking imaginary crumbs off his *Leader of the Pack* (wolf) T-shirt.

'Are you kidding me?' says Sophie. 'Motel pancakes? I -'

'Spending time with everyone!' Eve slings her arm forward to grab Alessa's neck, almost knocking her parents' heads together in the process. Her breath smells of apples. 'Family us!'

'Yeah.' Mark tilts his forehead towards Alessa's. Sweat sticks between their skin. He forgot his hat and won't wear sunscreen; he worries about cancer and is paralysed between his fear of the sun and of chemicals. Tonight, Alessa thinks, his speckled nose and arms and balding head will be dark pink and hot, and he'll try so hard to keep his I'm-dying thoughts inside. Alessa shuffles closer so she can reach an arm around both Eve and Mark. Feel the warm lumps of their bodies. The detergent-sweet-funk of them.

'I think I liked the Pirate Ship best.' Alessa smiles into the sun. The clouds are postcard fluff dots. 'But RumbleRapids looks awesome too. And it's still early.'

'Yeah.' Zac snips a look at her. 'I'm so glad we drove five hours north for this.'

'Hm.' This is Alessa's cheerfully-ignoring-you noise. Zac pushes his moppish hair back off his face and goes back to staring at the ground. The truth is, the Pirate Ship makes Alessa feel like her stomach is being filled with somebody else's vomit. But she doesn't want to give Mark any more reasons. That is to say, she wants him to focus on the fun part, all the ways in which he's going to be fine. He'd stayed in the Pirate Ship line right up until the last second, cheerfully certain that yes, he would use his ticket. But then he had a problem with his shoe, the kind that involved hot cheeks and pale, shaking hands. He wanted to ride, he wanted to be okay. He just wasn't. So the others went right ahead, as Mark suggested, and they waved like happy maniacs each time the garish vessel swung past him. Squeezed in the hot

plastic seat between Zac and Eve, Alessa watched the simulated danger on her children's faces, gripped the metal lap bar, and grinned her way through the bile swirling up her throat. All of this was pretty much awful, but there was one good/strange thing. When the ship had swung back almost to its peak, nearly vertical, gravity tugging at them, Alessa glanced to the left and saw not her husband or the amusement park but a wide clear field. She blinked. Now a crater, blackened destruction, the scorched future she read about every day in the news but couldn't quite enter. Then the down swing. Stomach acid pushed up to the base of her tongue, her children screamed, varying degrees of delight and fear. On the next upswing she tried to see it again, but the regular world was back. Blue sky and green leaves and people walking by. She got off the ride nauseated and diffusely disappointed.

Alessa and her family are now about twenty people from the front of the RumbleRapids line. It's like being in rush hour traffic, without the facial expressions and gesticulations: everyone's elbows tucked and exasperation aimed carefully at the sky. The young guy taking tickets has sweated a wide line down the back of his red DreamPark T-shirt. As each group shuffles up, he recites variations of 'how you doing?' and 'hey, how's it going?', the intonation ping-ponging as his slender fingers take the pink perforated tickets, tear them, and hand back the stubs. 'Souvenir,' he says to one little kid, who adjusts her Dora the Explorer sun hat and looks the other way. 'Or not,' he chuckles, watching the raft that just got loaded ascend the first watery hill. He stares for a long time, ignoring the next group of Hawaiian shirted young men, perhaps on some corporate bonding retreat, who clearly want to ask him a question. Alessa cheers him. Go you, young man. Feel free. Think your thoughts. Don't be –

'Mom?' Eve wriggles down her father's leg and grabs Alessa's elbow. 'I need to pee.' The last word a hot whisper.

Of course, now that they're just a few people away from the head of the queue. Eve's holding the front of her shorts and looking mortified and Mark is suddenly staring the other way. Red goose pimples up the side of his neck, finger and thumb working at the hem of his pastel yellow shirt.

'Okay, sweetie.' Alessa smiles. 'The bathroom's just this way.'

She grips Eve's sweaty meaty fingers a little too tight, hauls her out through the crowd. Eve has to skip unevenly to keep up. Alessa can't see her, she's focused forward on the throng of heads and shoulders and overlarge backpacks, but she knows how it is: small bit lip, thin brown hair stuck to her

forehead, soft pouch of belly above her jean shorts. Every precious painful irritation. A stream of praise and condemnation runs through Alessa's brain like background code. Sweet smile jagged teeth trusting nature gullible eats too much. Up too early steals things panders to her father. Full of soft promise and easy love.

There is a line ten people deep outside the women's room. Eve says nothing but emits a small whimper. 'Mom,' she hisses. 'I really gotta go.' She shuffles from one foot to the other. The tall woman in front turns and offers a sympathetic smile. Alessa squeezes Eve's hand.

'It won't be long, sweetie.'

They both know this is a lie. That the woman in front will not relinquish her place in the line (somehow her turquoise blouse and wide-brimmed hat telegraph this fact). They also know that Eve's bladder has never been strong; that she drank three glasses of juice at breakfast; and that every other person in this line has probably already consumed at least one huge slushie, or at the very least an ice cream, and they all have to allow time to undo their clothing, squat over the warm, wet toilet seats, wipe and flush, and that there is no quick bathroom solution if you were born with girl parts.

Eve has been saving her favourite shorts for this special day, and she loves them because they have a tiny sparkling unicorn on the rolled-up hem.

Eve makes a low, uh-oh-now sound.

'Okay, sweetie.'

But a line is a line, and pushing through would require either meekness or assertiveness, neither of which Alessa has in reserve right now. She feels a soft pop, a sensation of blooming – irritation? Rage? – in her shoulder. Alessa adjusts her posture, places her hand briefly on the back of Eve's head. *Everythinghappyfine*. Eyes ahead. The turquoise woman is standing very close and she smells of oats. Sweat gathers along the woman's neck crease, a shining line that runs from behind her ear to the front of her neck. Above that line an earring hangs: small, ceramic, white. It shivers with the woman's every movement, the tiny weight of the ceramic exaggerated by the pivot of the fine gold hoop that attaches to her lobe. Alessa squints. What is it – four legs? Mouse, hamster, horse? She leans, almost touching. The woman must surely feel breath on the back of her neck, but she doesn't turn. Only shakes her head a little. The earring figure swivels and there it is, a tiny ceramic dog, clumsy factory-drawn brindle markings down its back. A second good/strange thing yawns in Alessa's mind: the black crater/green field, flickering

back and forth, fast as an old film. The dog runs across both scenes in quick, long leaps. Maybe the tiny thing has teeth. For gnawing tiny bones, stripping flesh and sucking out marrow. Or maybe it eats soft food from a can, naps and yelps softly in its dreams.

The unknowing is both torture and joy.

Alessa drops her hand behind her, extending her fingers for Eve's grasp.

'Eve?'

Jesus.

'Eve?'

Shit. Shit. Heart beat-beat-beat and the thought: *it would be my fault.*

Alessa pushes past the turquoise woman, neck craned, elbows out. All these people, not one of them the right one. Alessa goes into the bathroom, puffs her cheeks against the smell of piss and bleach. Slaps each metal cubicle door. She keeps her voice inquisitive with an upward tick.

'Eve? You there?'

Maybe Eve went to the RumbleRapids line. Or she's waiting out by the ice creams.

Back outside, the light near blinds and the turquoise woman is standing near the head of the line, reading something on an ancient, shiny Blackberry. Alessa pans her face across the blurring scene.

'Mom!'

'Jesus! Eve!'

The child is squatting between two low bushes behind the bathroom block, a huge grin on her face. 'I peed!' she calls. 'And not in my unicorn shorts!' She fist pumps so hard she almost topples back into the garden bed and Alessa drops her head back, lets out a jagged laugh. Relief almost brings her undone at the knees. She leads Eve into the bathroom so she can wash her hands with cold water and the last drop of soap.

* * *

'Oh, hey!' Mark's arm sways high above the other heads in the RumbleRapids line. 'Over here!'

Eve grips Alessa's hand and pulls in front, dragging Alessa through the crowd. 'The line was so long!' Eve says, leaning up onto tip-toes as soon as they get close. 'I had to improvise, I went --'

'Oh? Great!' Mark runs his hand over his sweaty scalp. His cheeks are petri-dish flushed. 'Listen, hey, we've been at the start of the line for a little while, and the guy says – now that you're here it's our turn! We're on the next raft. How does that sound?'

Sweat has soaked halfway down the sides of Mark's shirt. One hand grips the chipped-paint rail that leads to the steps.

'I think,' Zac breezes past, hands the attendant his ticket. 'We should just get on with it.'

Alessa stands behind Mark, fixes her face with a smile.

Sophie passes in her ticket. 'You know what, Dad,' she says, glancing at the attendant, looking back at her mother. A quick glance through her eyelashes. 'It sounds like Eve didn't finish telling you what happened. Maybe you guys could –'

Mark takes an immediate step backwards, clodding into Alessa. His voice slaps like a palm on water. 'You want an ice cream, Eve? Does that sound good?'

Alessa rubs her mildly mashed foot against her right calf. She puts a hand on her daughter's small shoulder, drops her voice to pleased. 'You could show Dad where the ice cream cart is.'

The attendant coughs abruptly and a man behind them lets out a hot sigh.

'Yeah.' Eve palms the hair off her forehead and looks back up at her mother. 'We could go on the water ride after. When there's less people.' From above, her smile is mostly bottom teeth.

'Great!' Alessa digs in her bag for her ticket and brushes Mark's cheek with a kiss.

'Thank you,' he whispers, placing three fingers on her upper arm. A lifetime, there, of love and pain and negotiation.

'Of course,' Alessa says. A brief moment of eye contact and he slips from the crowd.

'Alllllll right!' the attendant sings, reaching behind Alessa to replace the chain barrier. He clicks it with the force of a spider-smash. 'If you'll just take your places on that side of the raft, wonderful! Don't forget your lap belts!'

Alessa seats herself between Sophie and Zac, bringing the thick Velcro strap around her middle and sticking it firmly over her belly. She glances at Zac, who places a hand over his half-heartedly attached belt and calls out to Eve. 'Hey! Woohoo!' His voice is genuinely upbeat. He gives a long arc of a wave.

The raft is round and dark green, smaller than it looked from the line. They sit at twelve, four, and eight o'clock, their knees almost touching in the centre. The water underneath begins to churn and an attendant scoots past to tap each of their belts. She wears a DreamPark cap backwards, her red T-shirt knotted above her tight belly. On the young woman's hand signal, the raft begins to climb the first mechanised hill. The wind picks up a fine chlorinated spray and the soft sides of the raft press into Alessa's aching back. She smiles and taps Sophie on the knee, next to the small constellation of freckles. Sophie nods and cranes her neck away, taking in the emerging view. Sun and trees and colour and fun. Alessa flattens the hem of her taupe shorts against her thighs, watches the small disc of water in the bottom of the raft flatten and finger and spin. The ride reaches the top of the first hill, pivots and descends in a short rush. Alessa closes her eyes and lets her insides knock around, listens to the small happy sounds her children make as the raft climbs and spins and drops and turns, spraying and sliding, taking them –

The raft shudders, slows.

Alessa opens her eyes wide but it happens so fast. The raft tips. The world turns. She sees flashes: Zac's wide-open mouth. A wedge of sparkling water. Sophie's palm. The planet slows and it feels as if her spine is flying out of her body. Pain twists and cracks. The tip-over completes and then she's underneath and it's dark and her legs sting and her brain tries to see –

It shows her a wide frozen river, glossy with semi-melt
And right out deep in the middle. The brindle dog.

Real now.

Large.

With fur and teeth and claws.

It stands in a puddle which is perhaps six feet in circumference, its face arranged into something like hope although it's obviously stuck.

Alessa tries to take a breath.

But only her dream-mouth answers.

This is.

Not

The dog is calm. Standing there. The pink pads of its feet must be cold but it doesn't shift its weight. Wind whips up at its face. Smell of pine needles and gasoline.

Alessa is alone. My children, my children, where –

Ripped away

The dog wants nothing. Raft water from RumbleRapids crosses into the frozen river, blurring the dog's face, smattering its back; it does not respond. Alessa watches those drops, stares at them hard. Trying to hold on, to hold in, swallow and own her last glimpse of the world. Then the raft water is gone and the dog splays its legs, all four, all at once, impossible, its ribcage sliding into that shallow puddle and its head turning, side-on now, a triangular terror-smile, a child's teeth inside.

The dog boats its legs along the ice, still splayed, like a water bug trying but

Still

Like

The way a dog's ribcage is pointed, a whorl of hair at the peak, pointing down at the earth the dog passes over when it walks explores eats shits pisses grins

Muscles bone flesh cracks

Water

Chlorine

Maybe the dog will stay until the looming terrors come, and when it all ends the dog will break into a run, because –

Verge 2020: Ritual

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Ritual

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