



PEOPLE PARK

A NOVEL

PASHA MALLA

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A NOVEL. HOUSE OF ANANSI PRESS, TORONTO

PEOPLE
PARK

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This edition published in 2012 by
House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
www.houseofanansi.com

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Malla, Pasha, 1978– People Park / Pasha Malla.

eISBN 978-1-77089-197-5

I. Title.

PS8626.A449P46 2012 C813'.6 C2011-908645-X

Cover design: Brian Morgan
Cover photograph: Jessica May Rita Kohut
Map design: Chris Tucker



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
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We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund.

- REDLINE
- BLUELINE
- YELLOWLINE
- BELTLINE
UNDER CONSTRUCTION
- FERRY



People, people, nothing but people! Yes, I feel it most strongly: I love people. Their foibles and sudden excitements are more dear and valuable to me than the subtlest wonders of nature.

— Robert Walser, *Jakob Von Gunten*

—Robert Walter Jekob Von Gumbert
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most strongly: I love people. Their foibles and
People people, nothing but people! Yes, I feel it

THE PEOPLE

The Pooles

PEARL: the mother
KELLOGG: the father
GIP: the son, Raven's
biggest fan
ELSIE-ANNE: the daughter, who carries a purse, always

The New Fraternal League of Men

GREGORY FAVOURS: the last living Original Gregory
BABBAGE GRIGGS: Head
Scientist
“NOODLES” SOBOLIN: Imperial Master
ROSSIE MAGURK: Special Professor
LUCAL WAGSTAFFE: Silver Personality
BEAN: Helper L2, a wily
asthmatic
WALTERS: Helper L2, D-Squad

REED: Helper L2, D-Squad

PEA: Helper L2, Snitch

DACK: Helper L2, Snitch

DIAMOND-WOOD: Recruit, on crutches

STARX: Summoner, very big

OLPERT BAILIE: Helper L1 (Probationary), reinstated and reluctant

Island Residents

SAM: aka Mr. Ademus, brother of Adine

ADINE: an artist, sister of Sam, partner of Debbie

DEBBIE: friend to all

THE MAYOR: the mayor

POP STREET: a living protest, a quartered century hencefrom!

CALUM: a teenager

CORA: Calum's mum

RUPE: Calum's brother

THE HAND: the girl with the hand-shaped haircut

LEFT AND RIGHT: twins

ISA LANYESS: Face of *In the Know*

EDIE LANYESS: daughter of Isa, Calum's girlfriend

FAYE ROWAN-MORGANSON: Face of *The Fate of Faye Rowan-Morganson*

LOOPY: artist laureate

LOOPY'S ASSISTANT: morose

TWO STUDENTS: a boy and a girl (names unknown)

CONNIE: Sam and Adine's mother (deceased)

And also

RAVEN: the illustrationist

THURSDAY

THURSDAY

How curious that it should begin on a day of dazzlingly flawless blue.

— Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*



ALL WE UNDERSTOOD: at nine o'clock that morning, the illustrationist would be arriving by helicopter.

In the pre-dawn gloom Helpers from the New Fraternal League of Men, mostly middle-aged guys in matching khakis and windbreakers, busied themselves with preparations. The streets surrounding People Park were closed to traffic and down on the common a landing area was marked off with pylons. From these a red carpet cut woundlike across the muddy lawn, up the steps of the gazebo, to the pressboard podium. Affixed to lampposts banners proclaiming the park's Silver Jubilee hung limp and dead sails in the cold still air. At just after six a.m., with everything readied, the NFLM assumed their positions, walkie-talkies crackling, breath puffing in clouds, and waited for the crowds to come.

The towerclock of the old cathedral, now the Grand Saloon Hotel, had barely marked six-thirty when the first people began to appear: families and lovers hand in hand, businessfolk swinging briefcases, Institute undergrads with their knapsacks and hangovers, teens walking bikes, the elderly in pastels, the tall, the short, the fat, the thin, the hirsute and bald, citizens of every shape and creed and trouser, many in Islandwear jackets — *Unique!* silkscreened into a skyline silhouette.

In a splendid show of diversity and solidarity, with the same look of curiosity and expectation, they came. As night lifted they came, the bruise-coloured sky leaking light while citizens from all corners of the island arrived stamping and squelching onto the wet brown grass, the mud suckled their shoes from their boots, a few thousand strong by the time the lamps and streetlights flicked off at seven-fifteen and everyone wrangled into order by the NFLM.

Atop the bannered poles, on the roofs of the boathouse and the Museum of Prosperity, amid the solar panels of the Podesta Tower, from all around, cameras trained on the crowd, panned over the crowd, zoomed into and out of the crowd, while We-TV commentators readied microphones and ran spit-slicked fingers through their hair. Camcorders pointed at the stage and sky and one another: when two faced it was akin to a pair of young pups nuzzling snout to snout, awaiting the instinct to maul a mate.

Though there were no dogs.

The tower bells sounded eight, and with room scarce on the common, new arrivals were forced up the surrounding hillocks. To the west in the windows of the downtown towers faces appeared framed in steel and glass. Some intrepid souls climbed into the leafless apple trees to the east, or the bar

limbed poplars on the park's south side. In a hilltop clearing to the north a handful of demonstrators wagged placards — ignored and estranged until one young woman was hit with a gritty snowball. Her boyfriend cried. Hundreds of people poured blithely past, the culprit secreted among them.

At twenty to nine by the towerclock the Mayor arrived alone and waving to perfunctory applause attempted to stride up the gazebo steps — and found herself marshalled sidestage behind a handwritten sign: VIP. Then a signal was given and a faction of Helpers formed a line before the crowd, arms yoked in the manner of paper dolls. They spoke into walkie-talkies, responses sputtered back.

Ra-ven, Ra-ven, Ra-ven, the crowd began chanting and clapping in time.

This was April 16, a bright cold morning warmed by the sun nosing out of the lake. Springtime was coming: stray patches of snow had gone crystalline and grey in their dying days, the asphodels would soon bloom, the trees beckoned leaves with their spindly arms, the crinkle of ice upon Crocker Pond fractured like an eczemic skin. Everything smelled of decay and worms, rich with thawing dirt. High above, a single cloud, a thin little wisp, trailed along — a baby bird lost from the flock. The *Ra-ven* chant faded. Everyone watched the sky because he would come from the sky.

Someone said, It's nearly nine!

Someone said, Shut up howbout, okay?

Someone said, Listen!

There it was: the growl of an engine, faraway. Everyone craned their necks and looked, but in the sky was just the cloud. He couldn't travel inside a cloud. But watching it drift along up there people began to wonder. In locales around the globe the illustrationist had defied many laws of physics and gravity and, more roguishly, the judiciary arms of governments.

There, yelled another someone.

A little piece of cloud seemed to be breaking away. But it was not, the crowd realized, a cloud that was now swooping toward the common, graceful and white as a gull against the deepening blue. It was a helicopter. As it approached the air began to thrum, applause splattered through the crowd, there were shouts and yelps and murmurs and with fingers pointed skyward hollerings of: There he is — He's coming — Yeah!

As though lowered on a rope the helicopter descended: one hundred feet from the ground, eighty-sixty, engines snarling. The crowd watched, faces slanted skyward. Those wearing hats were holding their hats. Some people plugged their ears. Puddles rippled and Silver Jubilee banners fluttered and tree branches trembled and all those cameras captured everything, everything. From her pocket the Mayor produced a stack of cue cards she patted into a neat little pile.

Pausing only inches from the ground the helicopter's twin tinted windows were the eyesockets in a polished white skull that tilted this way and that, regarding the crowd curiously. For a moment it seemed it might lift back up and away. Everyone watched, hands clutched hands and squeezed, heard

hoped. And at last as though satisfied the helicopter straightened and nestled between the pylons, and was still.

Two NFLM higherups scuttled out under the chopper's thumping main rotor. The engines settle the blades slowed from a single whirring disc into four separate propellers, and stopped. The Mayor smoothed her sash and stepped forward, cue cards poised, only to be impeded by a windbreakered arm and a freckled hand. Sorry ma'am, offered the arm's owner, eyes downcast, lashes the colour of lard.

The helicopter sat there on the lawn, gleaming and still — was the crowd watching it, or was the crowd watching the crowd? The feeling was of that cork-wriggling moment before the champagne pop is both anticipatory and dreadful. And then the door to the cockpit flapped open and out swung the illustrationist, Raven, a brownskinned man in a white velour tracksuit, baldhead glossy in the sun.

A roar went up. The crowd hollered and thronged and the NFLM held them back. A teenager whistled ironically. Hopping down the illustrationist shook hands with each of the men on the landing pad and whispered into the ear of one, a guy in sport sandals and thick woolly socks, who signalled to another, his vigorously nodding, goateed colleague, and together they pulled from the helicopter a white and glassy-metallic trunk. With loping strides Raven glided along the red carpet, up the steps of the gazebo, out to the podium. The NFLM hoisted his trunk onstage and retreated.

Raven gazed over the crowd. But as he opened his mouth to speak, from the Grand Saloon clanged the old towerbells. His head sank to his chest, he tapped his fingers on the podium. The hours rang on golden: the first, bong, the second, two more, then three, and in a show of impatience Raven thrust his hand to his forehead, closed it in a fist, and the strikes stopped at eight. Instead of the usual echo and ebb, absolute silence — a tongue cleaved from a singing throat, leaving only breath and flapping lips.

Cameras lowered, everyone looked around at one another, eyebrows arching. But Raven was clutching the edges of the podium now, leaning forward, what would he do next. His fingernails were either all cuticle or painted white. His gaze dragged over the crowd as a net trawling the ocean floor. Beyond People Park there was no indication of the city: its usual hum, its growls and gurgles and honks and whispers — all absent. The island had never been so quiet. Then, with sudden violence, he was the illustrationist: eyes widening, thrusting his arms into wings.

I am *Raven*, he hollered.

The crowd roared in a single voice and the illustrationist bowed to them and bowed to the cameras and bowed in the general direction of the Mayor, waving her cue cards like a winner.

Ra-ven, Ra-ven, Ra-ven, chanted the crowd again, almost pleading. But he looked past them to some place beyond their expectation. He snapped, thrice and crisply. The white trunk heaved open with a groan.

Hush fell. The trunk's insides were as dark as a coffin's. What was hidden within?

The sun continued its slow swing upward. The lone cloud had scattered into droplets — had the illustrationist made it do so, some people wondered. Raven stared out from the podium, the brown

his face and hands, the white of his nails, the white of his tracksuit, china-white teeth bared between parted dark lips, the black of the shadows behind him, the white trunk vesselling night into the daytime. The people waited. The NFLM stood fast — ever-khaki, ever-vigilant. The cameras rolled. The Mayor coughed.

Then the illustrationist sucked in a deep breath and hurled his arms above his head: six doves erupted from the trunk. The crowd applauded, cameras followed the doves upward. Raven pointed single finger, thumb extended, at the birds as they climbed. A gunshot cracked and the doves plummeted and thudded dully into the sodden field. But they were no longer doves: half a dozen pigeons lay there in the muck.

The crowd whispered, fell silent again.

The illustrationist looked deep into the rolling cameras, and crouching inches from his TV screen Sam watched through a fizz of static and shivered. In the illustrationist's eyes was — what? Nothing. His eyes are like tunnels, Sam described into the telephone. They're just black eyes.

Contacts probably, said Adine, on the other end of the line. What a doosh.

Summoned by the illustrationist's trembling fingertips the pigeons wobbled to life, tottered about with the wary steps of a litter just born. The crowd gasped and clapped and the cameras zoomed on and the illustrationist bowed. He snapped his fingers — once, twice, three times, the clack of bones.

He's snapping his fingers Adine, explained Sam to his sister.

I've got the volume up, she said, I can hear.

You can hear.

Just tell me what you see, she said. You're my closed captions, okay?

I'm okay Adine. I'm doing the work Adine. I'm doing good communication.

You sure are, buddy. And I appreciate it.

The crowd had gone quiet once more. It was as if a blanket were being ruffled over them, up and releasing their hoots and hollers, down and stifling them silent. A pause. Then the illustrationist flung his arms skyward, the pigeons lifted into the sky, they were white again: doves.

Sam explained to his sister what he saw.

He's done this before, she said.

He's done this before.

It was on TV, at some square in some city, said Adine. One of those places all covered with pigeons. He walked into the square and waved his hand and all the pigeons fell down and everyone thought they were dead and then he did something else stupid and they went flying away, all at once.

They went flying away.

Right. And then he cried a single tear off the main bridge and the rivers started flowing again after like a hundred years or something. God, I just can't understand how anyone buys this guy. The illustrationist Raven — it's just so affected and phony.

People like that sort of thing Adine. They like that sort of thing I guess.

People? said Adine, as though the word were a disease. People fuggin suck.

On the TV the doves vanished, the applause faded. The illustrationist peered down upon the crowd and grinned two rows of perfect white teeth from his brown face, arms still extended in the same way from the V from which he had released the birds. His eyes were two wet black stones and what Sam didn't tell Adine was that, looking into them, in his gut churned a sick, sour feeling of vinegar and rot.

Slowly, with drama, the illustrationist lowered his arms, returned his hands to the podium, curled his fingers around its edge. He leaned forward. He closed his eyes. He licked his lips.

He's opening his eyes, said Sam.

Look out, buddy, said Adine, here we go.

I am *Raven*, screamed the illustrationist, and everything exploded in thunder.

THE MINIVAN was trapped in a snarl of traffic along Topside Drive, bumper to bumper back over Guardian Bridge all the way to the mainland, cars and trucks and utility vehicles for sports cars and vans and other minivans too, though none as spanking fancy as this one, with its sidepanels in a woodgrain appliqué. The licence plate was vain, HARRY, and into Harry's roofrack were strapped two matching black wheelee suitcases in checked and carry-on sizes, and a hot pink duffel depicting a scene of witches and fairies upon a background of castles. Inside Harry were the Pooles: Pearl and Kellogg and their kids, Elsie-Anne, five, and Gip, ten years old and, with each new roar from People Park, more dismayed and defeated to be missing it all.

The Pooles' trip had begun Wednesday morning, post-meds: two pills on a swallow of grape juice and a daily cocktail Gip required for function and focus. Without it, for example, amid teasing on a fieldtrip to a classmate's farm he'd kicked out a schoolbus window and climbed onto the roof, kneeling up there screaming and punching himself in the face until the taunts of the other kids had alerted his teacher. Afterward Gip wept. I hate them, he sobbed, chewing the brim of his cap, I'm not a little piglet, I'm a *boy* — I hate them.

Those were what Kellogg and Pearl called Episodes. Meds curtailed Episodes. So did generally just keeping Gip happy. He had problems, sure, but what kid was perfect, no kid was perfect — medicated or not, he was as perfect a kid as anyone's. And while his classmates delighted in the unfortunate coincidence of Gip's physique and his name's written inverse, Kellogg preferred to think of his son as *healthy* — what Kellogg's own father, who had starved in the old country, liked to tweak the boy's small breasts and call him.

At dawn Kellogg piloted Harry along the main street of their sleepy and still-sleeping town. Passing Dr. Castel's office Gip hollered, We're going to see my idol Raven, Dr. Castel — *finally!* and Pearl took Kellogg's hand atop the cassette holder. The Pooles hit the coastal highway and the sky swelled into a great blue expanse mottled with puffy darling clouds. To the west the land rippled gently, all rolling farms and hillocks and cherry trees just blossoming, while the water glittered indigo to the horizon in the east. Pearl let her other hand loll out the window, the wind buffeted it dreamily. You couldn't worry about a thing, doing a thing like that.

The Pooles arrived too late to check in at Lakeview Campground so they stayed on the mainland at the airport motel, which Kellogg's guidebook commended for its satellite dish and prime rib, though

the pool was closed. From there, said the CityGuide, it would be a just a quick zip over Guardian Bridge in the morning — Back to Mummy's hometown, enthused Kellogg, which Gip corrected, Do you mean to see *Raven*? and Kellogg said, You betcha, and Pearl smiled, though her smile seemed pinched and in her eyes flickered something wary.

After ten grey-pink slabs of prime rib between them the Pooles descended a boardwalk to the Scenic Vista, a platform wedged into the cliffside. Across the Narrows the city was a dome of light plunked down into the night. Guardian Bridge twinkled in parallel undulating lines to the chalky bluff on the island's northern shore.

There it is, said Kellogg, the big city. Where Mummy was a star. How does it feel, Pearly? Is everything you remembered?

Well I didn't often look at it from this side, Kellogg.

Right. He rubbed a small circle on her lower back, the hand hovered in space, found a hump capping Gip's skull, Gip squirmed away and adjusted his hat. But wow, coming back after so long! Guess Mummy was something else for the — what was it?

Lady Y's.

Lady Y's. And there's the arena there! Beside that big round thing! What's that then?

The Thunder Wheel. God, I remember one time I went on it, on a date — what was that silly boy's name? A hairy little guy . . .

Kellogg shrugged, looked away.

Anyway he barfed when we got to the top. Sprayed all the way down on everyone.

Ew, said Kellogg.

He barfed! roared Gip. On a *ride*? Someone barfed *actual barf*?

He did indeed. Poor kid, he was scared of heights, what was his name . . .

More like the *Chunder* Wheel, yucked Kellogg. Anyway I bet my guidebook's got coupons. See if you can get Gibbles? To the left — other left! Maybe we'll get to take a ride!

The Thunder Wheel was a huge black disc, unlit and unmoving, which rose from the grounds of Island Amusements over the northern fringe of People Park. To its east the orange hump of IF Stadium glowed like a dinner roll under a heatlamp.

I have to pee, said Elsie-Anne.

Pee in your purse, said Gip, Dorkus. You retard.

I left it inside Harry, Stuppa, retard.

Hey now, said Kellogg, let's not call each other names, huh? But hey, anything you guys want to ask your mum? She was famous when she lived here, a real celebrity. Annie, one sec, okay — but think! That arena's where *thousands* of people came to see Mummy play. Imagine if she hadn't done her knee in? You guys might never have even been born!

Dad? said Gip, looking worried.

Anyway it's been a long time! How does it feel, Pearly? To be back?

Well we're not back yet, are we. We're over here.

Yeah but sure, you know what I mean. And you've got plans to see your old pals too, right?

wonder if any fans will recognize you? It must feel —

It doesn't feel like anything, okay?

The air stiffened. Across the river, the city shimmered and hummed.

Pearl patted her daughter on the cheek. Else, you need the toilet?

Hand in hand mother and daughter headed back to the motel. Pearl's knee must have been acting up: she favoured her left side as she walked, stiff-legged and lurching. But as always there was publicity and performance to her limp, a showy sort of pain. Down the highway a plane was taking off from the airport. Kellogg watched it rise, roaring and blinking, into the night. Look at that, he said, one in particular.

Dad? Gip was pulling his father's hand hair. We should go to bed because we have to get there early. Tomorrow, I mean. Dad? Raven's choppering in at nine a.m. in the morning and he's *always* precisely on time, so we *have* to get there at eight o'clock *at the latest* just to make sure, Dad, G huffed. To make sure we get a good seat, so we can see everything. Dad?

Got it, said Kellogg. We'll be up first thing. Don't worry, pal.

Later, back in the motel room, while Gip, who wouldn't share a bed with dead-to-the-world Dorkus, snored in his cot, and Pearl ground her teeth with the sound of marbles pestled to dust, Kellogg flipped through the satellite's endless TV channels. In the high 400s he paused: a large man in a red fez was being robed by a sexy assistant. Kellogg thought for a moment to wake his son, but Gip had no interest in magicians other than Raven. The assistant disappeared offstage — and, to a burst of delight from the audience, the performer collapsed, pitched backward, and went still. The screen cut to black. Kellogg shivered. Somehow it was one-thirty.

AT THE FIRST SHUDDER of light through the curtains Gip was up, shaking his parents awake and whipping the covers off his sister. Come on, come on, we have to get across to the island, Raven arrives today! As his family showered he danced around the room — Hurry Dorkus, hurry Dad, hurry Mummy, *hurry!*

Kellogg waited for Pearl to dress, then while she administered Gip's meds coordinated his outfit with hers: pale bluejeans, grey crewneck, ballcap. Emerging from the bathroom he announced, Matchy matchy! and Pearl covered her face in her hands. Come on, Kellogg laughed, we're on vacation, it's fun.

At breakfast Kellogg was loudly good with his kids, everyone's plates heavy with sausages tongued in pairs from the buffet — except Pearl's, she had yoghurt and fruit. All the other diners would surely look over at their table and think, What a nice normal family on a nice normal family vacation, holy.

How healthy his marriage had become again, Kellogg thought, like an amputee striding about on fresh prosthetics. He and Pearl talked things out, they were communicative and open, infidelity was inconceivable, Dr. Castel would be proud. And here they were, taking a holiday. They'd see some magic and camp and visit all Pearl's old haunts. On the south shore of the island was a beautiful beach, said the CityGuide, Elsie-Anne loved swimming so much, the little fish. And Kellogg would just be happy to make it happen, to make his family happy.

After breakfast, packed up and ready to go, in the parking lot Kellogg took Pearl's hands and said, Hey, we okay? Just kidding around, I can put on a different shirt if you want. Pearl said, Kellogg, he no, I know. Just feeling a little stressed, a little weird is all. Coming back is weird. With Harry's door ajar and dinging, Kellogg corralled his wife into his arms. I love you, he whispered into her neck. I know, said Pearl. I know.

Come on, screamed Gip from inside the minivan, it's past seven o'clock!

Elsie-Anne had wandered off down the boardwalk. Kellogg found her leaning over the railing at the Scenic Vista. A drainpipe jutted from the cliffs twenty feet down, she claimed an eel lived in its depths, she'd named him Familiar. Gently Kellogg pried her away, and as he folded her into Harry's backseat she whimpered, But I loved Familiar and he loved *me*.

Kellogg followed the ISLAND signs down to the water, where they hit a jumble of cars queued for the Guardian Bridge onramp. Pearl's allergies were acting up, she blew her nose, discarded the tissue on the dashboard, punched an antihistamine tablet from a blisterpack, swallowed it dry.

Just a little traffic, folks, no big deal, said Kellogg, grinning into the backseat.

Dorkus is talking to her purse, said Gip. It's weird.

Gip, why not try a trick from your book? suggested Pearl. Else, hey, wouldn't you like to see your brother do some magic?

While Pearl readied their documents Gip leafed through Raven's *Illustrations: A Grammar*. Tapping a page, he announced, Situation Thirteen, in which Dorkus picks a card, any card. Cunningly he fanned a deck on the backseat. Kellogg smiled at Pearl: how sweetly their kids played together, what lucky parents they were, and he reached over and squeezed his wife's arm as though testing for fruit. She regarded him with confusion — a look that suggested she didn't, for a moment, know who he was.

Hi, it's me, Kellogg — is that who I am, according to those things?

You're fine. It's the kids: Gib Bode, and his lovely sister L.C.N. Goode.

But you have proof you're from here, which gets us in — right?

Let's hope, said Pearl.

After a rambling, theatrical process that required Gip to consult Raven's *Grammar* four times, Elsie-Anne refused to admit, with a shake of her braids, that she'd chosen the nine of clubs. What? Gip said, brandishing it at her. This is your card, Dorkus. No it isn't, Stuppa, said Elsie-Anne, mirroring

was jack. Impossible! her brother screamed, and swept the rest of the deck onto the floormats.

Gip, barked Pearl — but Gip only gazed out the window, while the minivan crawled onto the lip of the bridge.

Why are we going so slow, he said. We've barely moved at all.

Just a little backup, said Kellogg. Got lots of people heading over probably just as excited as you and your pal. We'll get there, don't you fret.

Gip leaned into the frontseat. But gosh, it's nearly seven-forty a.m. in the morning, Raven arriving at nine o'clock sharp, and what if we don't make it for eight, which is when I said we needed to get there, if you remember. Don't you even listen to me?

Oh hush up, said Pearl. We've got plenty of time.

We'll get there, said Kellogg. Everyone's going the same place, traffic's got to go somewhere. Just likely making sure everyone's got their tickets and permits in order, and Mummy's from here so we can just whip on through. Okay?

No response.

One spot ahead of Harry was a maroon pickup truck with a bashed-in taillight. Its driver, a wild-looking man in a dirty blond ponytail and prospector's beard, leaned out the window to spit. The spit, even from this distance, was goopy and brown.

Disgusting, said Pearl, and sneezed.

Ten minutes passed, traffic barely budged, the pickup driver spat four more times. Gip ignored his dad's suggestion to try the trick again. Instead he began humming, a sound somewhere between the whine of a cicada and the bleating of a distant car alarm. Kellogg and Pearl exchanged a look. The driver of the pickup hawked out the window again, pulled forward eight inches. Harry followed, stopped, and Gip kept humming.

You guys excited about, Kellogg began, couldn't think what to say, turned on the radio: static. No signal out here I guess, he said. Weird.

Pearl turned the radio off.

Gip is humming, Elsie-Anne said. Mummy, Stuppa's humming.

Stop it, said Pearl.

The humming continued. Pearl cracked her window.

Little cold out for that yet, said Kellogg. And what about your allergies?

Pearl looked at him. He winked. She rolled up the window.

And Gip hummed.

Elsie-Anne covered her ears with both hands. The traffic jam stretched ahead, a steel-scaled python slumped over the bridge. The guy in the pickup truck stuck his head out the window, made eye contact with Kellogg, spat, and retreated back inside the cab. Nothing moved. Pearl pointed at the vacant opposite lane. Just go there.

I can't — sheesh, Pearly, here's a lane just for the Pooles I guess? He checked Gip in the rearview who hummed back. When Kellogg spoke again his voice was oddly boisterous, infused with the force of mirth of a waiter singing Happy Birthday to a table of businessmen. Hear that, buddy? Get us arrested why don't you! We'll get there, guys. Look, see, cars are starting to come the other way. And hey-ho! We're off now too.

But something was wrong: traffic was being routed back to the mainland.

A car swished past, the faces of the driver and passengers resigned. Gip's humming stopped. The clock on the dash ticked over to 8:00. Gip unleashed a scream like a bottle hurled against a wall. No no no no no no no no, he sobbed, kicking the back of his mother's chair.

Kellogg cried, Wait! — but Pearl was already diving into the backseat to tackle her son. Kellogg's technique would have been soothing, soft words and a gentle hand on his knee. Discipline was useless, he thought, watching Gip jolt and squirm in Pearl's arms. Episodes weren't his fault, you had to be patient — you subdued him with kindness, not force. Why didn't the boy's own mother understand that?

The pickup wheeled into a three-point turn and the shaggy guy absconded, spitting. In the rearview Kellogg watched Pearl cuff her son's wrists in one hand and clamp his mouth with the other while Gip thrashed and moaned. Hesitantly Kellogg put the minivan in gear, pulled forward, said, Look, champ, here we go.

Gip went still. Blinked. Inhaled a trail of snot.

That's it, coaxed Kellogg, we're at the checkpoint, we'll see Raven soon, don't worry.

In the middle lane sat a man in khaki at a child's schooldesk. Kellogg was summoned from the minivan with curling fingers.

Take Elsie-Anne, Pearl told him, still restraining Gip. Show him our permits.

Kellogg wanted to see something beyond resignation on his wife's face — love! Instead in her eyes was the beleaguered look of someone suffering a chore. Go, she said.

Annie, come with Dad, said Kellogg, and together they approached the guy at the desk — Bean said his nametag.

Bean nodded at Harry's plates. You have a resident in the car?

Former resident, my wife. She used to star for the Y's?

Leafing through the papers, Bean eyed Elsie-Annie. Who's this?

That's Elsie-Anne — L.C.N., see? Someone must have —

Bean held up a hand. And Gib?

With my wife. He's . . . sick.

Sir, you realize no one in your quote-unquote *family* has the same last name?

That's maybe not our fault though?

You're suggesting it's ours.

No! Just a miscommunication maybe? It happens . . .

Bean swivelled, spoke into a walkie-talkie. Took a puff from an inhaler. Eyed Kellogg with the ambivalence of a bored shopper sizing up a lettuce.

Kellogg gazed down the bridge. Along the island's shore was more gridlock, a call-and-response of horns, long blasts echoed by long blasts, all of it useless, nothing moving.

Mr. Poole, we're going to need you to get processed once you're islandside. Your wife is fine — Bean stamped her permit forcefully, handed the others over — but the rest of you need special permission before you can join the Jubilee celebrations.

But! No, we can't do that — my son, he's . . . We'll miss Raven's arrival!

Bean checked his watch. Not much chance of you making that anyway. NFLM on Topside Drive are expecting you, they'll direct you to Residents' Control — that's the Galleria foodcourt, five minutes from the bridge. Good lookin out!

Thanks, said Kellogg, and headed back to the minivan wondering what he'd thanked him for.

Elsie-Anne raced ahead to the bridge's railing, hopped up, leaned over. And went rigid. Dad, she called, pointing below. Look.

A naked woman was walking — precariously, slowly — out onto one of the iron trestles that extended from the structure's underside. Two hundred feet below lay the river, a ruffle of black silk spangled silver, and as the woman stepped, one foot then the next, the wind tousled her hair like the hand of some benignly drunk uncle. Pigeons burbled somewhere, but Kellogg couldn't see any pigeons.

The woman seemed oblivious to everything: to the traffic, to Bean and his flares, to Kellogg and Elsie-Anne, to the world and all that was in it. Her back was hunched, her buttocks alabaster. At the end of the trestle she stopped, arms extended for balance. If she were to jump it seemed she would be leaping not down, but outward, into open space.

Oh my god, said Kellogg. Elsie-Anne, get in the car.

Dad?

Kellogg snatched her by the chin. You listen, if that person jumps and we're the only witnesses, we will *ruin* our vacation. You won't get to swim, Gip won't get to see his magician — we'll be at the morgue, answering questions. They might even blame us! So forget you saw anything. Get in the car. Say *nothing* to your mother. Hear me? Nothing.

Elsie-Anne nodded.

Good girl, said Kellogg, knuckled her cheek, slid open Harry's door, ushered her inside, slammed it closed — and looked over the railing. The woman hadn't moved: a porcelain, otherworldly figure who seemed to float in the brisk morning air.

Kellogg opened his mouth to call to her, to tell her — what? But it was too late: a great tumble of hair, and the trestle was empty.

Trembling, Kellogg rushed to catch the body's splash or see it swept away in the current. But Bea was calling him: Sir, sir, in your car, please, sir. So Kellogg stopped, apologized, returned to the minivan. In the backseat Pearl, sniffing, stroked Gip's hair. Elsie-Anne stared vacantly into her purse. Okay, said Kellogg, moving his foot from brake to gas. The engine vroomed, he pressed harder, Harri went nowhere.

You're in Park, said Pearl.

Oh, said Kellogg, shifted to Drive, and lurched another ten feet closer to the island.

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