

ARE WE THERE YET?

Sometimes our destinations are not what we expect.

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ON A PARTICULAR August day, not far from Ridgewood, Pennsylvania, a black Grand Cherokee wound its way over a hilly countryside. The closer the Coleman family got to Ridgewood, the harder the rain fell. Fifteen-year-old Douglas Coleman pulled at his sweaty T-shirt and wished that the air conditioner in his parents' Grand Cherokee worked. The "grand" had left the vehicle several years ago. Same with their lives. Their fortune had been yanked away over the summer by a cruel twist of fate, right before the dog days of August had hit.

He didn't care if they ever got there, but he asked anyway: "Are we there yet?"

"Almost," his mother said. "Another half-hour is all." She looked unhappy, as though she had done something wrong. Douglas sighed and crossed his arms. It wasn't she who had made a mess of things.

Next to him in the back seat, Douglas's eleven-year-old sister, Keera, snored. Drool leaked from the corner of her open mouth and formed a puddle along the front of her pink T-shirt. Douglas wondered how she could sleep when it was so hot and their lives had been ruined—thanks to him, of course, though his mother and Dr. Jarvis insisted that it wasn't his fault.

He clenched his jaw and deepened his frown, if that were possible. No matter how many times his mother said that things were going to get better, he knew they would never be as good as when they had lived in Minneapolis.

Keera took a breath and snored louder. Douglas jabbed her shoulder until she turned her head and quieted. Then he tilted his own head and let the warm spray from his open window douse his sweaty face.

The landscape of woods and occasional farm and cornfield looked like home. But it wasn't. Minneapolis and everything that had been theirs were a long ways behind them now. There would be no going back until he turned eighteen. Then he could go to college at Minnesota State where many of his friends planned to go, and be far away from a place where the state depended on a captive groundhog to predict their springs.

We have no other choice, Dougie! His mother's words still resounded in his ears from the days they had spent packing. They were SFC: strapped for cash, a term his father had started using after lightning had struck him three months ago. It was a term that Douglas hated hearing. It ranked up there with SOL, which was how he felt most of the time.

In the front seat of the old truck, Adriana Coleman banged an open palm against the dashboard. The engine was overheating again.

"We there yet?" Douglas's father asked as he awoke from his nap.

"Almost," Adriana said. She pointed to a giant, white billboard sign ahead of them that read WELCOME TO RIDGEWOOD in large, blue letters.

Maurice Coleman rubbed his right temple as he turned in his seat to look at Douglas. "We're muh-moving, son," he said. "Nuh-new home, new town, new people. New, new, new."

Douglas's face soured. "I don't want to make new friends," he said. "It's taken me all my life to make the best of the ones I've left behind."

Adriana said, "When we get settled, you can e-mail your old friends, or call a couple next weekend. I know they would love to hear from you."

Douglas sighed. "Like they're gonna care about my new life. I saw their looks. They were glad it wasn't any of them heading to a new place." He sputtered as a realization clawed at his mind. "I'll be the new kid at school. The one everybody'll pick on."

"It's tenth grade. You won't get picked on."

Before Douglas could argue, Adriana said, "I know you're going to like your new bedroom. You'll have plenty of space for your easel and desk and all your paints and canvas and—"

"Whatever. I'm not painting anymore."

"Anyway," Adriana said and sighed, "it's a beautiful home in the country, just down the road from Uncle Jason's farm."

"Great. I love the smell of cow manure."

Adriana set her mouth firm. Her expression was one of iron now. Douglas returned to gazing out at the lousy rain. The move was his fault, after all. If he had put away the lawn mower before going to Kenny's house, then his father wouldn't have been struck by lightning while putting the mower into the shed. But he had been in a hurry to see Kenny's new computer, and so the storm came and knocked Maurice Coleman from his shoes with a lightning bolt that left him with impaired short-term memory.

Blame and guilt weighed Douglas's shoulders. If not for his carelessness, his father would still be employed as a lawyer. And not just any lawyer. Maurice Coleman, the man about Minneapolis, had been successful as a private practice lawyer, earning as much as six figures last year. But now, he wasn't well enough to be an ambulance chaser.

"Nobody's fault," Maurice said from the front seat.

Douglas clenched his jaw, turned away from his father, and glared out his window at downtown Ridgewood. The streets appeared barren and so did the stores—a steady conglomeration of brick and cement shops that shoved against each other. Their windows looked dark and lifeless, though all were open for business. Even the tiny McDonalds and Burger King—cramped between more brick buildings—looked dingy and deserted. At a street corner, Douglas looked at a discolored tavern on the left, its only visible window sporting a black sign with white letters that announced fifty-cent wings on Friday nights. Below it, neon signs advertised a selection of beer inside. On the uneven sidewalk in front, three young girls around the ages of ten or eleven came around the corner and passed by on Rollerblades, each of them teasing each other with obscenities. An old, sickly looking man in a tattered Army jacket stepped out of the tavern, turned up his collar to the rain, and then looked at Douglas and grinned. Douglas shuddered at the rotting teeth he saw and looked away. Icy pain sliced through his stomach.

"I spy ... muh-my right eye," Maurice Coleman said, "suh-something blue." His stutter caused Douglas to clench his jaw tighter as another icy feeling jolted through his stomach.

"C'mon Duh-Douglas," Maurice said cheerily, "play along."

Douglas crossed his arms and held in his anger. "Later, Dad. Okay?"

The light changed and Adriana drove them deeper into an increasing murkiness of more constricted stores that looked empty of any life. They crossed over a cement bridge and a wide gray fording called Myers Creek. On the other side sat a gothic stone church called St. John's Cathedral. Its bell was in mid-procession of peeling four o'clock.

Past the church, St. John's Cemetery rolled wide and far with many tombstones marking the dead there. Keera awoke and screamed.

Douglas jumped and nearly screamed as well. Alarmed, Adriana turned to Keera, and then returned her attention to her driving when a car horn sounded at the stop sign she almost ran. Maurice made hushing sounds, but Keera sobbed louder.

"The cemetery ... it scares me," she said. "I saw myself buried beneath the ground."

"It's okay," Adriana said. "It was just a dream."

Keera turned to Douglas. Her tears dropped to her chin. "I saw you in a coffin," she said between sobs. "I saw Mommy and Daddy, too."

Pain knifed through Douglas's stomach. He shuddered.

"Bad dream," Maurice said. "Bad dream tap-tap-tapping."

Douglas's stomach lurched. "Mom," he cried and hiccupped. "I don't feel good."

"We're almost there. Just two more miles."

Maurice made more hushing sounds as he turned and looked out his rain-covered window. "Almost home," he said. "No more tap-tap-tapping."

Douglas pressed his hands against his stomach as his mother drove south and into the murky countryside, past woods and occasional clearings of soggy cornfields and pastures with waterlogged fences and muddy cows, and farms with rusted trailers and car skeletons in the yards.

They stopped at an intersection and Adrianna waited for a semi decorated in yellow running lights to speed by before she eased the steaming, chugging vehicle into the intersection.

Douglas saw the other semi come at them from the corner of an eye.

Instantly, a thousand screams filled his head. His world exploded, which deafened the screams. Then all sound and sight went dark. He flew in darkness a long time before he awoke.

He stared out his window. The closer he and his family got to Ridgewood, Pennsylvania, the harder the rain fell.

The move was his fault. He pulled at his sweaty T-shirt and asked, "Are we there yet?"

"Almost," his mother said. "Another half-hour is all."

She looked unhappy, as though she had done something wrong.

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