

The Prototype

Bill Gerard will get the prototype today.

Buoyed by this knowledge, he digs through the rack bursting with outerwear of every imaginable color and size. When he unearths his nondescript grey coat, a pink fur-lined jacket and a sequined backpack cascade to the floor. Bill has one arm inside one arm hole when he hears the twist and click of a doorknob behind him. He turns to see his eldest daughter, halfway down the dark hall, emerge groggily from her room.

“Good morning kiddo,” he says.

“Mrrmph,” Hannah grunts and shuffles into the kitchen.

Bill chuckles and shakes his head. Teenage girls live on their own planet, he thinks as he fastens the coat’s topmost button. When she was young, Hannah had been like his shadow. She’d gone everywhere with him—first in a baby carrier strapped to his chest, then in an overpriced stroller, then in goofy light-up sneakers with wheels built into the soles. But circumstances had changed.

Inside his practical sedan Bill shivers, hands on the steering wheel, shoulders rounded into their habitual horseshoe shape. He has not recovered from the chill he picked up during the short walk from the front door to the driveway. It is uncommonly cold this winter.

When Bill bursts through the front door several hours later, he does so with such force that a purse and scarf tumble down to join the ever-growing pile beneath the coat rack.

“Girls, *girls!* I have something to show you!”

The house is silent, and his search of the premises reveals only a series of sprawling messes. He is standing in his youngest daughter’s Lego-strewn bedroom when he hears the front door open.

“Marylin?” he calls.

“Hi hun!”

He finds his wife in the foyer, struggling to extricate her foot from a heavily-buckled boot. Her curly grey-streaked hair falls in front of her face. “You’re home early,” she says. When she looks up, her husband leans in for a kiss which she dutifully provides. “You seem happy.”

“You sound surprised,” Bill responds.

“I’m not, it’s just...did something happen at work?”

Bill grins deviously. “They gave me a prototype.”

“Oh.” As much as she might like to, Marilyn cannot share Bill’s enthusiasm. He has brought prototypes home before. The robotic dog was cute, but liked digging holes in the yard. And the self-driving scooter had caused a serious injury.

“Where are the girls?” Bill asks. “I want to show everyone at the same time.”

“Avery is with her friend Caroline, and Hannah is just finishing up band practice.” Marylin’s tone is lightly arched, because her husband ought to know the Tuesday afternoon schedule by now.

Bill does not notice. “Perfect!” he says. “We’ll go for a drive.”

Hannah pulls the door shut, wraps her arms around her torso and shivers. This has been the most miserable winter she can remember. The sky has been a solid block of grey for weeks. It makes her want to curl up in bed forever.

“Hi sweetie!” says her dad.

“What are you doing here?” she answers with a frown. Her dad never comes to pick her up from band practice. And yet here he is, craning his neck to smile at her from the passenger seat while Marylin pulls out of the parking lot.

“I have something to show you.” He holds up a small white box.

“What is it?” Avery asks brightly.

Hannah directs her frown toward her sister. “Why are you sitting in the middle seat?”

“Daddy told me to.”

Hannah rolls her eyes. Avery is way too old to be saying “Daddy.”

The daughters watch with varying levels of interest as their dad opens one end of the box and removes a razor-thin square of translucent plastic. It wobbles expectantly in his hand as he holds it up for them.

“Watch this,” he says. Then he turns and sticks the patch to the bottom-right corner of the windshield. Hannah watches him move his palm in little circles to make sure it is thoroughly attached. As soon as he takes his hand away, the square lights up—bright blue.

“Oooohh,” says Avery. She leans forward to get a better view.

The square fades and then pulses blue two more times.

“I don’t get—” Hannah starts to say.

At once, all of the car’s windows flash bright blue. Hannah swings her forearm up to cover her eyes. Marilyn lets out a shriek.

“It’s okay!” says her dad. “Just keep driving!”

The flash lasts only a second. When the windows clear up, something is different. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that everything is different.

Hannah can see the street and the other cars and the houses at the edge of their neighborhood flying by, as they were before. But the sky is no longer grey. It is a vivid blue. And the trees that were bare moments ago are full of leaves. The leaves are an exaggerated shade of green, as if someone has turned the saturation way up on a photo.

“Waaaooooowwww,” says Avery.

“Bill.” Marilyn sounds worried. “What’s going on?”

“Isn’t it glorious? It’s called Ride+.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yes, yes, you won’t hit anything. Everything you see is really there. The version you see is just...improved.”

It’s true. The houses they pass are brighter than before, their paint fresh.

Yards overflow with blooming vines. There is a new gloss to the world as it flashes past. What was mundane seconds earlier now dazzles.

“Wow that is...really something,” Marilyn says.

“It’s going to revolutionize my commute.”

Her dad’s eyes dart in all directions as he tries to see everything at once. A rainbow has somehow formed overhead, even though there are no clouds. He lets out a childlike giggle when he sees it. Gradually the sky begins shift from blue to pink and orange—the colors of rainbow sherbet.

“Look!” Avery points out the window as a flock of glittering purple butterflies flits past.

Bill swings around to grin at her. “Do you like it?”

“I LOVE IT!”

“What about you honey?” He looks at Hannah expectantly.

She wraps her arms around herself again.

“It’s fake,” she says. She feels a little guilty, the way her dad’s face crashes. But she doesn’t like all this cheeriness. It makes her feel worse.

“Now Hannah,” comes Marilyn’s voice. “Don’t be a pill.”

Hannah bristles. “Can we just go home?”

Marilyn glances over at her dad and pats him on the knee.

“Fine, we will drop you off,” she says. “And then the rest of us are going for a *ride!*”

“Yayyyyyy!!” says Avery.

Ride+ does revolutionize Bill’s commute. He springs out of bed each morning eager to spend over an hour on the road. The cars that drive alongside his are all sleek and clean; the people inside them young and attractive. The strip of land beside the highway, which he vaguely recalls being filled with broken-down cars and other trash, transforms into a savannah. Giraffes and elephants tromp along inches from his windows. A few days later these animals

are replaced by dinosaurs, and two raptors battle to the death in the sky above the highway. The next night he witnesses another battle, this one between spaceships. Bill gets distracted occasionally, but the car practically drives itself so he doesn't hurt anyone.

He does notice a few glitches in the technology. When he turns the car sharply, the images sometimes blink off for a moment. And after a while he realizes that the faces of the other drivers all look quite similar. Attractive, sure, but too uniform to be realistic.

Bill reports the bugs to the technical team and they seem grateful. He is glad that he can help the company improve its product. He keeps telling them that he can do more than just plug numbers into spreadsheets.

A few days later his manager comes by his workstation and claps him on the shoulder.

“Enjoying the prototype?” he asks jovially.

“Am I!” Bill swivels around in his chair. “It’s terrific. I can’t wait to come to work every day.” He smiles wryly. “And then I can’t wait to leave.”

This joke gets the reception he was hoping for—a hearty laugh and another slap on the shoulder.

“Well I’m happy to hear it,” his manager says. “And I heard you gave the design team some valuable feedback. We all really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. I just wish I could use Ride+ all the time!”

His manager flashes him a conspiratorial smile.

“Won’t be long,” he says.

One week later an engineer hands Bill a pair of glasses. They look not unlike his own, though the frames are a bit thicker in a manner that he presumes is considered hip.

“Will these work with my prescription?” Bill asks.

The engineer smirks and shakes his head. He is wearing a black zip-up

sweatshirt and seems to think Bill is pretty dense.

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore. See this?” The engineer points to a small metal circle just inside the left earpiece. “Life+ has a direct mind-to-screen interface.”

“What does that mean?”

“It incorporates feedback from your brain. It’s customizable.”

“So I can...think things into existence?”

The engineer shrugs. “Kind of. Here, try them.”

Bill takes off his own glasses and the world goes slightly blurry. He carefully lifts the Life+ goggles to his face with both hands. They are surprisingly light, and they fit his face perfectly. The little piece of metal rests just above his ear—cold at first, but after a second he can’t feel it anymore.

“Try to read this.” The engineer holds up his phone. On the screen are a few lines of fuzzy text.

“I can’t.”

“Try.”

Bill stares at the grey smudges for a few seconds. Gradually, they turn into words. They say: *Welcome to your best life, Bill Gerard.*

“Wow!”

“You can read it?”

“Yeah!”

“Good, that means it’s calibrating correctly. It’ll take a few days to break in, but you should be good to go.” The kid’s expression slowly becomes more cheerful, his voice peppier. “They told you about the security on this project, right?”

“Yes,” Bill says. “Top secret.”

“Right. That means you can’t discuss it with anyone. Not even your family.”

The engineer conveys this information in such a cordial manner that it doesn’t trouble Bill one bit.

Hannah shoves a forkful of quinoa into her mouth, barely chews it, swallows and scoops up another bite. It tastes like sawdust and she imagines it lining the bottom of a hamster cage. She isn't even hungry. Dinner is just another task to get through. Avery is describing some eight-year-old drama that transpired at her school that day, while Marilyn nods and laughs at the appropriate times.

Hannah takes a long gulp of water. Her thoughts are consumed by her phone, which calls silently to her from where it sits charging on her nightstand. All she can think about is whether Astrid has replied. Hannah already regrets admitting her feelings in a text, when she should have done it in person. She's a damn coward. She moves the remaining food around on her plate, hoping it can be reasonably interpreted as finished.

"How about you, Hannah?"

"Huh?"

"Your day," Marilyn says. "How was your day at school?"

"Oh." Hannah shrugs. "Fine. I actually have a ton of homework. Can I be excused?"

Marilyn lets out a weary sigh. "What do you think, Bill?"

Hannah and her father haven't talked much since he came home with that stupid car window trick. She knows she hurt his feelings and she doesn't want to apologize. Not that it makes any difference. They haven't—really talked—in years. Not since they lost mom.

But now her dad is staring at her with an eerie grin on his face. "You're all just so beautiful," he says wistfully. "My beautiful girls."

"Ew," Hannah mutters under her breath.

"Aw, dear." Marilyn smiles sheepishly and runs a hand through her hair. "How sweet."

"I'm going to take that as a yes," Hannah says. She grabs her plate and stands up.

“Love you, sweetheart,” her dad says.

Hannah stops, holding her half-eaten meal aloft. Her dad smiles dreamily at her.

“Whatever,” she mumbles and slinks off to the kitchen. She deposits her dish loudly in the sink and rushes to her room.

As soon as she tilts her phone toward her face, all hope drains out of her body. She stares at the lock screen, at the selfie she took with her best friend who now won't return her texts.

Bill Gerard's life has become a dream. His wife looks a decade younger. The sun shines all day and at night the sky fills with more stars than he knew existed. The girl at the coffee shop subtly flirts with him when she takes his order each morning. His coworkers smile and listen attentively to everything he has to say.

He thinks it reminds him of being a young man, but he is mistaken. No moment in Bill's entire life has been anything like Life+.

He takes Marilyn on a date, their first in over a year. She looks ravishing in a dark velvet dress that hugs her curves. They go to their favorite steakhouse, which is much more elegant than he remembers. Ornate chandeliers cast a soft glow across the faces of happy, attractive people all chatting in hushed, melodious tones.

Bill orders a bottle of cabernet, which turns out to be best wine he has ever tasted. He tells Marilyn this and she agrees. He is halfway through the best steak he has ever eaten when his wife says she thinks they should talk about Hannah.

“What a great kid,” Bill says as he chews. “So pretty and so smart! She must get it from her mom's side.” He winks and stabs another slice of beef with his fork.

Marilyn nods, and then says something that Bill doesn't understand.

“What's that?”

“I’m worried about her.”

Marylin doesn’t look worried. Bill waves the hand that holds his wineglass, causing the dark red liquid to swirl violently. “Oh come now, Marylin. Don’t be such a party pooper. Let’s enjoy ourselves tonight!”

Marylin is silent for a moment. “I think you should talk with her,” she says finally.

She is still smiling, teeth perfect, face radiant. Bill refuses to consider why her facial expression might not match her words.

“Of course I will,” he says, and takes a long sip from his wineglass.

I hooked up with Jason Bardot this wknd.

Hannah pretends to do homework while glancing at her phone every two minutes for the next hour until Astrid replies.

Nice. he’s hot. how was it?

Hannah considers answering with the truth. That she’d only wanted Astrid’s attention. That by the time she was on Jason’s bed she’d thought about screaming and pushing him away, but she’d decided to just get it over with instead. That she had felt nothing while it happened. That his face at the end had looked grotesque. That afterward she’d felt a vast emptiness.

It was great.

Hannah wishes now that Astrid hadn’t responded at all. At least then she could have imagined that she was jealous or upset.

There is a knock at her bedroom door. She locks her home screen and tucks her phone into the pocket of her sweatshirt.

“What?” she yells, louder than necessary.

“It’s your dad. Can we talk?”

Hannah’s heartbeat spikes. Did he find out about Jason? How could he have?

“Sure,” she responds, seeing no other option.

Bill opens the door and walks in. He is still wearing that creepy smirk on his

face. He gazes around the room—at the posters attached to the walls with multicolored thumbtacks, and the small twinkle lights that she arranged years ago—as if it is all new to him. Hannah wonders fleetingly how long it has been since he stepped foot into her room. Probably two or three years.

“We haven’t talked in a while,” he says as he takes a seat in her plastic desk chair, “and I’m just wondering how you’re doing.”

Hannah looks at the floor and shrugs. “Fine.”

“Everything ok at school?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, Dad. School is swell.” Her voice drips with sarcasm. “Everything is awesome. I’m living my best life.” She holds up her hands in a hokey double thumbs-up. She waits for her father’s smile to deflate, his jovial mood evaporate. Waits for him to soak up some of her misery. Waits for a reminder that she still has control over something.

“Wonderful!” Bill claps his hands together. Actually claps. “That is exactly what I wanted to hear.” He jumps up and leans over to give her a tight, brisk hug and a peck on the forehead. And then he leaves.

Hannah sits on her bed and feels the walls of her room close in. She grabs her phone, desperate for an escape, but sees only her own stupid face smiling back at her.

On Sundays Bill takes a walk around the neighborhood. He used to find it rather boring, but with Life+ it is a delight. Today Avery is with him, because Marilyn is at a book club or a hair appointment or some combination of the two. An attractive neighbor wearing a semi-sheer top smiles and waves at them from her yard, which bursts with colorful flowers that he cannot name. Bill waves back. He is trying to come up with something charming to say when Avery interrupts.

“I’m cold.”

The sun is bright, but it is a bit chilly, so Bill agrees to turn around.

They are nearly home when a scream slices through the quiet suburban afternoon. It is a sound unlike anything Bill has ever heard. Joy, ecstasy, elation all rolled into one. The voice is unmistakably that of his wife.

Avery drops his hand and runs to the house. Bill quickens his pace to follow her. When he gets to the front door, he finds it open. Marylin is standing in the hallway, rooting around in her purse.

“Honey, what—”

Marylin finds her phone and dials. “Hello,” she says, “we have an emergency—”

Another delighted yell, this one from Avery. Bill follows the noise to Hannah’s room.

“What is it sweetie? What’s so exciting?”

He walks in and sees Hannah napping, just as she had been before they left for their walk. She looks so peaceful, her breath flowing in little wheezes through slightly parted lips. Avery stands a few feet from the bed, staring silently at her sister, hands clasped over her mouth. Then Marylin is there, grabbing Avery and trying to pull her out of the bedroom.

“Honey, what’s all the fuss about?” Bill asks his wife.

He sees Marylin’s hand swing toward him, but he doesn’t duck. The sensation in his face is, at first, a thrill. As the goggles fly off and he blinks into a slightly blurry world, the feeling changes to a dull ache. Noise floods him. The tone of everything shifts down, from major to minor. Avery is crying. Marylin is screaming.

“How could you let this happen?”

Bill blinks. “What?” His mind feels numb.

“Hannah!” Marilyn wails, and points an accusatory finger in the direction of his daughter. He looks again. Her lips are blue. Her mouth hangs open ghoulishly and one pale arm droops off the side of the bed. On the floor, an orange plastic bottle lies empty.

Bill looks away.

“She seemed fine...” His words come out in a whisper.

“*ARE YOU BLIND?*”

“I...I can't see without...let me just...I need to get...”

He shuffles out into the hall as a siren rises in the distance. Bill scans the floor, but he can't see them, so he gets down onto his hands and knees and crawls along, arms sweeping frantically across the dark carpet. When his fingers brush against the plastic frames, he cries out in relief. His hands shake as he returns the goggles to his face.

Bill's world comes back into focus. The siren wail shifts into a poignant melody. He stands up, walks back to his daughter's room and looks inside. Marylin holds Hannah's head against her chest and rocks her, gently murmuring as if in prayer. Avery kneels next to the bed, holding her sister's hand in both of hers. The melody crescendoes and the house pulses with blue and red light. The room glows, illuminated as if by sun through stained glass. When she sleeps, Hannah looks so much like her mother.

This thought pitches Bill slightly off-balance. Something is creeping in to unsettle his serenity, like the faint scent of decay.

Hannah opens her eyes. She does it silently, without moving a muscle. Her gaze flicks up to her father, and one corner of her mouth curves ever so slightly. It is a smile he remembers from when he used to tuck her in at night. Marylin and Avery don't notice the smile. For that sliver of a second, father and daughter share a secret all to themselves. The moment crystalizes and everything seems to hang suspended, perfect and eternal.

Suddenly, desperately, Bill needs to know if it is true.

With two shaking hands he reaches up and pulls the goggles from his face. Chaos engulfs him: heaving sobs, pulsing light, voices shouting from the driveway, coming through the front door. The goggles fall from his hand and hit the floor with a crunch.

Hannah is not smiling. Her expression is pained; her forehead layered with rivulets where sweat has condensed. Small drops of saliva have collected around the edges of her mouth, and her face remains ghostly pale. Her eyes are bleary, unfocussed, heavy lids barely lifting.

But her eyes are open.

It is, by far, the most beautiful thing Bill Gerard has ever seen.

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