

A Too-small Life

Levi pushes down hard on one pedal, then the other. He is breathing hard and sweat itches the middle of his back. He's supposed be home before the sun goes down or he'll be grounded. Again. There is only a bit of pink left on the horizon.

He will tell her that the hill is steep, that his bike is old, but her ears are closed. "No excuses, Levi."

She's always on him to do better. To be more. When he can't understand his homework, she says, "Read it again. Push on through. You can do this." When he's too tired to do his chores she says, "Ignore the tired. Push on through."

"What about Wind? You never make her do anything."

"Don't be unkind, Levi."

Her words had shamed him. Wind was born early and has trouble learning.

His house is only three blocks farther on, but his leg muscles burn. Perhaps, he thinks, if he gets off and walks the bike home, he can tell his mother that the chain broke. She won't check. She's always too busy with Wind.

Levi doesn't hear the vehicle until it's beside him. When it swerves and cuts him off, he startles, the bike wobbles, and he falls, landing hard on his hands and knees. A white van screeches to a stop, the side door slides open, and a man jumps out. "I'm fine, I'm not hurt," Levi says but his words are cut off when a man grabs Levi, clamping a hand over his face.

Levi struggles, throwing fists and kicking backwards, but is slammed to the floor of the van. The man sits on him and binds his hands with a plastic tie. Levi sucks in a lungful of air,

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ready to scream when the man slaps a piece of tape over his mouth, then ties his ankles together. Levi twists back and forth, but quickly becomes exhausted.

“Listen, kid. We’re not going to hurt you, so calm down. We only want to borrow you for a day or two and will bring you right back here.”

The woman driving looks over her shoulder at Levi. “You didn’t bruise him, did you?”

“I hope not,” the man says, climbing into the passenger seat. He picks up a beer bottle, takes a long swig and then snaps a cigarette lighter, holding it to the end of a short, twisted white paper tube. Sweet smoke fills the van. He sucks hard and passes it to the woman.

“How old is he?”

“Nine, maybe ten. Might be Native or Mexican.”

“Good. Perfect.”

As the van drives on, Levi tries to memorize the route like he’d seen in a movie that his mother wouldn’t let him finish because she said it was too violent. They turn right, then left, then there’s the sound of gravel popping underneath. Soon they come to a stop.

When the door is flung open, bright stars dot the sky and a silver moon smiles down. The man grabs Levi as though he weighs nothing and flips him over his shoulder. Levi twists his head, looking around but sees only a paint-peeling farmhouse, a swayback barn, and something that might have once been a chicken coop. Beyond that, the Montana prairie stretches out, forlorn and forever.

He’s carried into the house and down a flight of stairs. The man turns the key on a door, drops Levi onto a narrow cot and sets a brown bag on the floor. “Here’s supper. I’m going to

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untie you now, but if you try anything, I will punch you into goddam oblivion. Got it?"

Levi nods and the man pulls a knife out of a sheath on his belt and cuts the restraints. "Lights out in ten minutes." He leaves, locking the door behind him.

It takes a long time to work the tape off and some of the skin on his lip goes with it. He licks, tasting blood, then climbs off the bed. The springs squeak in protest. He's scared, even more scared than when his mom was sick in the hospital after Wind was born.

The room is small, the walls are made of stacked cement blocks painted pale green, the ceiling is rafters and rough wood. In one corner is a toilet and tiny sink with a faded red checked curtain pulled to the side. There are two cots covered with thin blankets and no chairs or tables.

Something moves on the other cot, and he jumps back and screams. A girl sits up, gazing at him with large, blue eyes. She rolls off, and trots to the grease-stained bag. She's wearing pink tennis shoes, jeans, and a shirt with a rainbow on the front. A thin book is tucked under one arm and Levi recognizes the cover. His sister, Wind, has one like it—Dora the Explorer. The girl pulls a hamburger from the bag, unwraps it and takes a bite.

"Who are you?"

"Faith."

"How long have you been in here?"

She shrugs and holds the bag out to him.

She's small, about the size of Wind, who just turned six. He doesn't want this bad food; he wants to be home where his mother is making lamb stew. But his stomach growls so he grabs a burger and a carton of milk. The burger is cold. The milk is warm.

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“We have to get out of here,” he says frowning at a small window near the ceiling. Even if he put the girl on his shoulders, she wouldn’t be able to reach.

“They won’t hurt you if you do what they say.”

“Why are we here?”

“They take pictures.”

“Pictures?”

She nods, blond curls halo a pale, freckled, face. “Different costumes. I like the skirt made of long grass the best.” She shrugs again. “Sometimes no clothes.”

“What are the pictures for?”

She says nothing for a long moment. “They get money.”

The light clicks off and the room is dark but for a shaft of thin moonlight coming through the window. He runs over, twists the knob, then kicks the door. “I want out of here,” he yells. He pounds the wall and fights back the tears, then looks longingly at the window. It’s the only way out. He pinches the bridge of his nose and glares at the girl. He hates her and doesn’t know why.

His grandfather used to tell him, “When confronted with a challenge, be still and open your mind so that the answer can find its way in.”

Levi sits cross-legged on the floor, closes his eyes, and works hard to quiet his thoughts. The window, the walls, the two beds...

He jumps to his feet, tosses the mattress and blanket to the floor, braces his legs, and pulls the cot toward the window, stopping when the metal legs make a loud scraping noise. He listens for the sound of stomping feet on the stairs. When nothing happens, he lifts one end,

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swinging it a few inches, then the other end until his back aches with the effort. He can't do it alone and the little girl will be no help. Maybe if he screams, and begs, and promises to not tell anyone, the man will let them go. Loud country music thumps down through the floor and heavy footsteps overhead cause dust to drift down on their heads.

He pushes through the pain, moving one end, then the other, back, and forth. At one point he bumps into the wall and is surprised to see that he is finally close enough. But the next part will be impossible.

He bends his knees and lifts the end of the metal frame up over his head, but his shoulders shake, and he almost drops it. It takes every bit of strength to lower it to the floor, so it doesn't clang. *I want my mom*; he thinks and almost screams it out loud. But the girl is staring at him with those big eyes, so he runs to the sink, pulls the curtain shut, and sits on the toilet, his face in his hands. *I want to go home, I want my mom, I want grandfather.*

Maybe it will be alright. Maybe the two bad people really will take him back like the man promised. But Faith doesn't even know how long she's been here.

When he steps out the girl is sitting, head down, reading her book. He studies the bedframe for a long time. "If I give up, we'll never get out of here," he mumbles. The muscles in his arms feel stripped, but he lifts the end of the bed, grunts, and slowly, inch by inch, walks his hands along the underside pushing up, up, until finally the frame bangs against the wall. It worked. He can't believe he did it.

The top of the cot is only about a foot from the bottom of the window. After wiping the sweat off his face with the tail of his shirt he grabs the sides of the frame and digs his toes into

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the springs, climbing one cautious step after another. He's almost to the window when something snaps and his foot slips. He clings to the sides, heart racing, then moves his foot to a different spring, pushes twice, testing it, then giving it his full weight. Two more steps and he's able to grab the window ledge.

The glass is thick and milky but there is enough light for him to find the handle. It turns, then snaps off in his hand. "Nooooo," he whispers, closing his eyes.

He takes a deep breath, then pounds the glass with his fist, but it does not break. Does not even crack.

The girl is looking up at him, her face round and white like the moon.

He jumps to the floor and paces in slow circles. He needs a tool. A hammer—something to break the glass. But there's nothing in the room. Even the lid on the toilet tank is gone.

It didn't work. Moving the frame was a waste of time. Now he doesn't even have a place to sleep. This is not fair. Not fair. "Stupid bed," he yells, running at the frame and giving it a hard shove. The cot slides across the wall, one leg knocks against the window, making a tiny crack.

He throws his head back and starts to laugh, then clamps a palm over his mouth.

Grabbing the bedframe on both sides, he backs up, walking it away from the window. It's top-heavy and nearly falls on him, but he does not quit. Timing the blow with the beat of the country music he grunts, pushes, and bangs the metal foot against the glass. He pulls the frame back, waits, and hits the window again. On the third try, the foot punches a hole in the center of the glass. He climbs up, avoiding the broken spring. Cool air rushes through the hole and he hits the glass with his elbow knocking out one pie-shaped wedge, then another. Soon the window

looks like an open mouth lined with jagged teeth.

He pinches the pointy pieces, trying to wiggle them out but they do not budge so he grabs the blanket, folds it into a square, lays it on the bottom, and turns to Faith, surprised that she doesn't look as happy as he feels. "I'm getting us out of here!" he says in a loud whisper, waving his arms. She turns blue eyes to the window, then jams a French fry into her mouth.

"It'll be easy. You go up like I did. I'll be right behind you and help you through. Don't make a sound. When you're out, scrunch down and wait for me."

She shakes her head.

"You can do this. You must be strong and brave. Like Dora." He waits. She slides off the cot, walks slowly to the frame, puts one foot on the wire, then looks back at him.

He talks and soothes and eventually gets her up and through the window. He follows, ripping the back of his shirt and cutting a gash in his hand. But it doesn't matter. They are free. "It's a long walk, but the moon is our friend. He will guide us."

He squints up at the farmhouse and can see two shadows behind the drawn shades.

They crawl around to the other side away from any windows and scurry behind the chicken coop, then to the barn. "We have to get to that bush." She says nothing so he grabs her hand and pulls. They kneel behind the bush. "We are going run across this field. Stay low. The buffalo grass is sharp and may cut your legs, but don't quit." Levi is a better runner and Faith quickly grows tired. He tugs her along until she drops to the ground, breathing hard. "Ok, we're far enough away. We can walk. No more running." Every few steps he looks back at the old farmhouse, relieved when there are no shouts of anger, no flashlights crisscrossing the long-grass

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prairie.

They reach the gravel road and turn right because the last turn the van took was left. Moonlight glows off the blades of grass, lights up a thousand spider webs, and makes the world appear magical.

Faith is trailing farther and farther behind. He turns to scold her and sees that she is limping. “Stop. Sit down.” He lifts her left foot. Her sock is bloody. There is a wicked blister on her heel.

He could move faster if he left her here and came back with the police. But she is so tiny, and scared, and trying hard not to cry. “Climb up on my back. I’ll carry you.”

Even though she does not weigh much, he quickly grows tired. “Push on through,” he whispers.

At the end of the county road, he turns left and his heart swells. Lights twinkle on the horizon. With each step he grows more certain that it is a town and walks faster even though he stumbles often.

Faith taps him on the shoulder and points behind them. Bright headlights are heading in their direction, dust billowing high into the sky. “No, no, no,” he moans, then trots to the ditch, rolls Faith off his back, and they lay flat, hidden behind globes of kochia weed. A white specter barrels past, then veers left into the field.

Like a race car it drives around and around in ever-widening circles, then stops, its headlights penetrating a small stand of trees. After a long moment it turns and heads directly at Levi and Faith. He looks down at her and her skin glows iridescently in the moonlight. He

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doesn't know what to do. "Be still and open your mind." The van is almost on them now and he closes his eyes and lays on top of Faith, covering her completely, his brown skin blending with the dark prairie soil. The van passes so close that he can smell burning oil and feel the heat of the engine. It launches over the road and onto the next field. Then there is a loud thump followed by the buzz of spinning tires.

Levi hazards a peek over the berm of the road. The rear tires are bogged down, stuck in the freshly tilled soil. The man is out of the van, bellowing and waving his arms in the air.

They crawl along the ditch, thorns cutting his hands and knees. Faith is panting so loud he's afraid the two people will hear her over their own shouting. When they are behind the small stand of trees, he lifts her onto his back and jogs.

With each step he tells himself, "Just one more." He pretends this is his little sister, Wind, and he must save her, for he is the responsible older brother. When his muscles cramp, he falls to the ground, rubbing his thighs with knuckled hands. "You need to walk," he tells Faith. "I know it hurts, but I can't carry you any longer." He grabs the hem of his denim shirt with both hands and pulls, trying to tear the fabric. But mother made it strong. "Close your eyes." He drops his pants and takes off his underwear. They are old and thin, and he rips off a long strip which he wraps around her wounded foot, tying it in a knot in the front. Then he eases her foot back into her shoe and pulls her up.

The moon slips behind a cloud turning the world dark, and he whispers his thanks. The lights are closer now and he can see that it is not a town, but two long barns with tall, overhead lights. There will be no help at those barns. Again, his throat swells with tears.

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He does not scare Faith by telling her the truth. There is no choice. They must walk on.

A sound, like gravel tumbling down a hill, loud, then soft, then loud again. He spins around and around, looking for the source. “Ah. Yes,” he grins. Gobbles and chuckles and clucks.

“It’s a turkey farm,” he tells Faith. “The lights are there to keep away fox and coyotes. I know this place.”

He tugs her along, anxious, happy. He wants to run, but Faith is like an anchor, another weight he must bear.

When they get to the barns, Faith pinches her nose. The odor of droppings and molting feathers is strong, but to Levi the smell is like wildflowers.

They walk to the far side, find a spigot and drink metallic-tasting water until their stomachs hurt.

“It’s only a little farther,” he says, loud enough to be heard over the noisy birds. “We’ll be at my house before the sun is up and then we can call your parents.”

Faith’s shoulders drop. She turns and starts to limp back the way they came.

“Wait. Where are you going? Don’t you want to see your parents?”

He can barely hear her soft reply. “They are my parents.”