

Word Count: 2,850

Perambulating

"Alex," she said, "the way she is gestating it must be a boy. Do you see she carries this low keg form? That tells you."

"I'd like to see her bring it off first," said Alex, his eyes flitting over his tablet, then briefly lifted. He was still in his pajamas.

Just as he had never intended to be a yoga freak, his mum never thought she'd drag herself all the way from Iran to fulfill a latent ambition to become a detective, nor to find out life was endlessly puzzling, as much as death was not. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she so adored Midsummer Murder Mysteries, or the other series with even gruesomer deaths, presided over by the dark-haired inspector, the one she sheepishly watched as he rolled around the hot potato in his mouth. When Alex phoned her when either one was on, she made no bones about asking him to try her again later. Would she do that to Sylvia, though?

Alex's mother was adlibbing like Homer, seeing the ships home, her myopic eyes sussing out the gold and red Shahbaz standard, that was streaming defunct nationalism above the decorative samovar.

"But what if I'm right?"

He had shown his mother some recent pictures of his sister who lived in a remote seaside hamlet, 13.5 kilometers from where they were, and was pre-diagnosed with

crankiness, diagnosed with stonewalling, and undiagnosed with borderline. Added to that string of afflictions was advancing pregnancy, which their joint snooping had confirmed.

"Mum, at one point the child will be born and I will find you pictures, okay? With a bit of luck she'll post her ultrasound scans. Otherwise, it's no use trying to see into the future, and occupy yourself with pseudo-science. I know you're desperate to pry open the slit, but don't fill in the gaps with sheer nonsense."

A while later, he looked up again and saw his mother's eyes watering. Alex entered something into his tablet and gave it to her. He spoke soothingly. "Check out this page with signs it's a baby boy or a girl."

Her deformed hands went out to the tablet greedily. She bent her head in obedience over the sheer nonsense. Alex grabbed a paper newspaper, and returned to the couch.

"I *was* right," she said. She veered straight in her wheelchair. The tablet went back to black.

Alex looked up. He was smiling? Why was he smiling? "What did you read?"

"What I read is unimportant. It's what I think about it is important. You know Sylvia is addicted to chocolate."

Alex nodded. "Well, aren't we all? Except for reformed me, of course."

"Once a chocolate gobbler always a chocolate gobbler. Do you think chocolate cravings go away once you get older? They only get worse, I can testify for that.

Remember how she wrote 'in a pickle'? In her, what-che-me-call-them. She's in a

pickle haha. When you carry a baby boy you crave pickles and not chocolate. How do I know? It was exactly the same with me when I was carrying you!"

"Great job, Sherlock. Sounds stupid to me, but anyway. You have no evidence whatsoever she has lost her soul to pickles."

"That child has no soul. And I will find evidence. Give me that tablet."

"It's on your lap, Mother."

"Oh, it's in my laptop. Haha."

Her laugh only went to her mouth and didn't alarm him. When he started doing his yoga exercises in the space between the wheelchair and the TV, which showed noiseless pictures of the King and Queen's visit to the Netherlands Antilles, he felt less alone. Several sun salutations put him right again.

Twisting her wrist as if offering a biscuit to a guard dog, his mother tapped a deformed thumb that seemed to be stuck on sideways.

Alex stretched his back, and pushed his bum back as far as he could into down dog.

The King, his neck donned with pink lei, did the bus stop before he shook the governor's hand.

Alex went into striking cobra.

His mother coughed.

Under a billowing divi divi tree, the King listened to a song belted out by rainbow children waving red-white-and-blue flags.

Alex sank deep into warrior two, his thigh muscle trembling.

The Queen pointed to the exits.

His mother sipped her morning tea.

The three princesses pointed to the mouse holes.

Alex crawled out from his bagel and walked to the shower.

Later that morning, Alex helped his mother over the balcony threshold. They had coffee and butter cake that was like Persian cake but without cardamom, rosewater, or nuts. One of the opposite neighbors sat on a plastic chair, smoking, unperturbed, watching the World Championships through his kitchen window. His mother sniffed the sweet tobacco and sighed with relish. It reminded her of Pop, and more recent, her Dutch language teacher and friend, Jet.

"What did you learn?" Alex asked.

"I'm still gathering my evidence," she said.

He'd forgotten what they talked before and looked at her bewildered. Let her steam a little, he thought.

"The weather is amazing, isn't it? The view is."

"There is beauty living in a place like this in the advanced stage of being a post-refugee," said Alex's mother. "It doesn't matter how high one resides above the ground, without the use of one's legs one can be stuck anywhere. I wouldn't mind living even higher up, but unfortunately in our little town council regulations limit our dreams. However, we should be thankful the municipality took my needs into consideration; though, especially with all the grayheads snapping up apartments faster than you can say Mach."

It was true. There were many days she didn't reach the ground.

"I often ask you to go for a walk, don't I?" said Alex. "Yet you don't always want to go. You're not turning your nose up to us lowly creepers, are you?"

She burst out with a curse he didn't know. "Me? I was always fond of walking outside, smelling the green and the flowers, or just the wind ruffling over the slick, laughing at how you dispersed the confused mess of sheep. But it's only recently that I've been noticing how the skies are like a cinema and the sun colors the air vents silvery, or the stretch of the fields around the traffic light makes me giddy. It was all micro for me. I delighted in the micro. But I think I've gained." His mum sniffed in one last salutary breath before the smoker turned inside.

"Well, you don't need to explain it," said Alex, gathering their coffee mugs. "Things are as they are."

When they emerged from the front door of the building, the dregs of blue sky were being overshadowed by dark clouds with eerie yellow linings. The mother was packed in a bright red cape with wide slits through which he could pull her stalky arms. After a few meters over the pavement, pulling faces, she was thunderstruck by the turn of the weather. "Look at those clouds."

"Aren't they spectacular?"

The wheelchair scraped down onto the roundabout, which they crossed to reach the wood. The mother told Alex to choose the shortest, sunniest route. At his prompt, she hung over the side of the wheelchair to study a cluster of purple flowers. She admired them, saying they had them in Iran too. But she couldn't think of their name, not in her old language and not in her new language. Alex was disappointed, because he

didn't want her to lose words or any information about her former life -- he knew it was what sustained her. Though life in Iran had been a daily peril, their family was still intact. He stepped onto his left foot and onto his right foot, wanting to go -- that she was able to point out the flowers' features in endless detail (magenta and purple bell flowers, pointy leaves, that they hugged the ground) didn't impress him. Her keenness of mind shouldn't be confused with optimism. What bothered him was that he only acted as if he were her friend.

"Those clouds are still there. Better hurry," she said.

He huffed, looked up, and saw that the wind was chasing them away over the treetops.

"Hurry where?" he thought, and watched how the wind blew an hourglass in his mother's hair. Unlike the local Dutch ladies of her age, she insisted on dying it. Brown hair with white planted in the skull, like pearl clasped in its bed of mindlessness.

"I don't want to go to the petting zoo today," she said.

"Why not?"

She struggled to give a fair answer. "I don't like the animals. I don't find them interesting."

"And if I like it?"

He knew, it wasn't about him anymore, and hadn't been for a long time. As fond as his mother was of him, they were in limbo, awaiting news from the other side. However long the wait would take, that news would always be more important.

Through her strong glasses, she was peering abstractedly at the hens trotting around her wheels, the cock on the dunghill – she was probably afraid they'd pick at her legs.

There was a lone pig. He wasn't obliged to tell his mother there was a lone pig. She would say something terrible.

They halted in front of a large cage with parakeets.

"Did you know some of them can learn to talk like parrots?" Alex asked.

"Why would they like to do that?" his mum countered.

A man in squeaky black wellingtons streaked with poop said hello. He looked as if he had some kind of syndrome and hadn't developed to normal potential. One of his eyes was closed, and the shape of his face and bald skull were much like an inhabitable planet. He pressed his face against the wiring and cooed the birds. Of the group that was sitting on the beam, two had paired off and were pecking at each other's beaks.

"Kissie kissie," said the keeper. "Birds, kissie, kissie."

As if on audition, the birds kept on their stiff-necked nuzzling.

"Birds, say I love you."

"Can they speak?" Alex asked.

"Of course," said the keeper. "They make their signs, you know. But they don't necessarily want to let us on. They're telling each other their phone number so they can catch each other later." He winked.

"Too much information," said his mother. "Can we continue please?"

The keeper winked at Alex when he passed. Maybe he wasn't so retarded after all.

After lunch, his mother went to her bedroom to perform her intricate ablutions. Some minutes later, he heard her call the nurse. It was the only thing he didn't want to help

her with, for now -- he couldn't imagine what things might be like when they got worse. Reassured, he took position on the balcony, taking his well-thumbed tablet with him. The dark clouds had blown over. He thought how, through the glass balustrade, the street, well-planned, subdued, at the edge of their friendly provincial town, looked glassy too, removed. It tickled his appetite like an advertorial of the real world. Sometimes, but not today, it would make him want to swoop down, in superhero mode.

His mother would like to see more, for sure. While his face turned masklike and rigid, Alex dissected several albums that could assist her quest for answers. She looked like an unusually happy baby, smiling practically from day one. Alex himself had been dour in comparison. He was also ugly, with his pug nose, which only came unstuck around his seventh birthday. Sylvia as a little girl pulling their father's hair. Pre-puberty, she was pretty and resembled him; she would go daddy this and daddy that, but after his death he was shoved onto the list of those to blame. Sylvia lying on the floor drawing in her sketchbook, scribbling animals with grotesque members getting it on with tiny waifs with shuddering breasts who, lashing out whips like those used in horse riding, another fad of his sister. Now that would be a subject for his mother's sleuthing: How equestrianism could make one crazy. He in jogging trousers and a white t-shirt and hair on end in his jazz class, one of only two boys. There she was leaning out from the pavilion in the maze at Schönbrunn, on a school trip to Vienna, the picture probably made by her only friend from that time. Just remembering that girl's horny smile under her thick glasses made Alex shudder. And then pictures from her wedding, at quite a young age, a simple affair without aunts, uncles or cousins: shoulder to shoulder with Peter, her rock. There was one more of their parents' silver anniversary, wading in a sand drift in a lone wood on the Belgian border, a beautiful

hike if not for Mother complaining of fatigue and hip pain. The next photos were already pulled from the internet, and on it they could follow, meticulously documented, shared with their circle of friends and through them with the greater world, the pregnancy and the birth and first smiles and first steps and the first time she pulled her father's hair, of his mother's first grandchild. A year later, they had spotted Sylvia again carrying extra weight, but that bellyful disappeared.

To think of that pregnancy that for some reason had been terminated, didn't sadden him more than the realization that he would probably never see that child under normal circumstances; normal meaning in family circles.

Resolutely, he tapped Sylvia's album close.

He went back to an album with digitalized photos from his parents' old family album. The extended family on their weekend picnic, before the Revolution, sitting on a rug laden with food, a white-topped mountain in the background. Grandma the only one not smoking in the courtyard of their parents' house. An angry mob throbbing through the street, one of the demonstrations against the Ayatollahs in which his mother's brother was fatally shot. A poignant snapshot when they were knee-deep among crates, deciding what to take and what they couldn't take with them to their new home. Then a party at the refugee center in the town of Goes in the Netherlands, with other Persians, Armenians and Somalis, one or two Nigerians, and with Jet, the teacher, all smiling brightly, on chairs placed in a circle and they were munching ethnic food, polo with chicken kebab, herb salad, pistachio cakes: all the good things that Sylvia detested, because she wanted to be a real Dutchwoman -- whatever that meant. She had become such a good Dutchie that, in her embrace of western individualism, she could ditch her mother.

It was half an hour later and he had seen what he wanted to see, before he heard his mother approaching. The contrast between his mother telling him with wide eyes that she had achieved a new record of standing for one whole minute and a half (leaning on the shoulders of her therapist) and his fantasy that she would now be standing beside him; that set off against the slow and difficult approach when she pushed her wheelchair.

"I am going to stay inside," she called. "Can't face it anymore. That threshold will kill me one day."

Alex started arguing with her; he praised the soft spring air, but in the end he turned in.

"Did you find anything?"

"Sure, lots of pickles." He smiled.

"I see you're getting into this as well, eh?"

"Mama, I'm not getting into this." His stomach contracted. Although he hated how his sister had become, and he didn't care if he never saw her again after those last vicious attacks, the keen pain he felt inside him was akin to missing her, missing her presence and all those years they had lived in the same house, when he assumed they shared more or less the same past. It really felt as if he were up alone against everything that wanted to take things apart, including the specter that was molding his mother into an eldritch copy of the robust, original woman she had been. But no, he was not getting into her game. He knew what was what, and though the shifting perspectives had become part of his life too, because only stupid people thought that reality was one thing and unchanging illusion was on the flip side of the coin, they were just mirror

images, moving through love and hate. But the body at least, whether captured in a mother-with-child-image or in something else that was easy on the eyes, was something you could look at -- although it probably had little meaning.

He got her a picture wherein his sister was reading on the sofa with the toddler playing on the carpet with Lego Duplo. Holding the book steady with her hand, a Frisbee tray was on her growing lap. His mother peered through her progressive lenses.

"Well, if that isn't a pickle." She smiled. Alex wished he could share that indestructible delight.

[The End]