

The Most Inaccurate Map in the World

When I find the eviction notice on the door, I tell my four-year-old daughter we are going on a vacation. I load the car with our smallest furniture and trash bags full of clothes, toothpaste, and hairbrushes. She follows me up and down the stairs with her stuffed pink elephant, Bradley, in hand. “Where?” she asks.

“A fairy castle,” I say.

She softly whacks me in the leg with Bradley, creating a beanbaggy thump as his insides jostle. “Be serious,” she says.

“I am,” I say. “We’re going to have dinner with the fairy queen.”

“Don’t fairies steal children?”

I wish I hadn’t read her that story, although it gave me more nightmares than it did her. “No, these are nice fairies. They couldn’t steal you if they tried. They’re too tiny. You could pick the queen up in your hand.”

She smiles. I’m starting to win her over. “What are we going to eat?”

“Mushrooms.”

“Ew!”

“And blueberry pancakes,” I say. Her smile cracks open.

In the backseat, she builds a nest of blankets, pillows, marker boxes, and picture books. As we leave the neighborhood, a dense flock of birds quilts the sky. Through the windshield, I see their orange bellies. Robins.

“Where are they going?” my daughter asks.

“They’re migrating,” I say.

“They’re what?”

“They’re going on an adventure, just like us.”

“To where?”

The robins minimize into dark paper boats set afloat in a calm blue ocean. “I don’t know.”

“You *don’t know?*”

I shrug. The robins disappear beyond the tree line. I wish I were the person she sees, who knows every answer.

I drive aimlessly, my paper map abandoned beneath my seat. Sometime after we pass the city limit line, my daughter stretches past her

seatbelt's confines, picks it up, and uncrumples it. She scribbles lines over the rivers and city names, adds a perfectly square Canada at the very bottom, puts America inside China inside Africa, a nesting doll. She adds a dotted trail to mark our progress, which ends in a jagged line representing a castle. When she's done, it's the most inaccurate map in the world. I coo over it and tape it up on the window like the pictures that once hung on her walls. She lifts it up to look at the grasslands streaming past, the paper sheet fluttering on her head with each breath of the AC.

By afternoon, I realize we're headed in the direction of the beach I took her to for her last birthday. It feels like fate. "Babe, the fairy queen said she wants you to find the prettiest seashell for her," I say.

"We don't have one," she says.

"I know just the place to look," I say.

When we park in the sand with rows of families on vacation, she squeals in excitement. I sit on a bath towel, watching her chase seagulls, build fairy castles in the sand, wiggle her toes in the water. She and a little boy fill a plastic cup with seashells, choosing a chipped zebra-striped one to keep. We fall asleep in the car to the sound of waves, her splayed out in her nest with Bradley under one arm, me reclined in the driver's seat.

Each morning, we eat McDonald's for breakfast like she used to beg for and wash our hair in their sinks. Whenever she gets restless, I pull over by the fields and we chase each other. Our apartment had no TV, so I pretend we are getting our car inspected and we sit down in the lobby so she can stare at the tiny screen in the corner while I take the complimentary coffee. Robins follow us overhead, painting the car with gloppy acrylic shit. Blessedly, she does not ask where her bed is, does not ask when we are going home. I tell bedtime her stories about the fairy castle. The fairies took a hundred years building it so it could be big enough for humans to come inside. You must only wave your hand and food appears, every room has a big TV, and they have contests to see who can find the rock with the most holes. The castle infiltrates my dreams. I always wake with a crick in my neck. I park the car for longer and longer so I do not waste money on gas, buy leaner meals so she can get ice cream. I don't know how soon we will run out or when we will stop.

On the third day, I no longer recognize street names. We park and sleep beneath the umbrella of a bent cedar. We wake to cawing. Robins speckle the grasslands, pecking at roots. She sits in my lap in the backseat while I comb fingers through her hair, lifting the map on the window to watch the robins.

“They’re Halloween birds,” she says. To me, they look like little men, orange ties on their chests, wrapped in black tuxedos from head to toe. Her fingers curl around the door handle. “I want to catch one.”

I gently remove her hand. “They’re too fast. Don’t bother them.”

“I’m not bothering them. I wanna pet them.”

“They wouldn’t like that. They’re not like pets.”

She grumbles but settles down. “Which one’s your favorite?”

“My favorite?” I squint. They look the same to me, dressed in matching uniforms.

She points to a tiny one with a stilted hop. “I like that one. He has a funny leg.”

“Then it’s a good thing he has wings,” I say.

The robins yank invisible insects from the ground, unaware of our gazes. I wonder if some find it so nice here that they decide to stay, and their mothers and brothers and sisters are sad to see them go.

“Maybe they’re going to meet us at the castle,” she says.

“Maybe.” I rest my chin on her head. I dread the day she stops believing in fairies.