

*Jen Michalski*

**You Were Only Waiting for This Moment to Arrive**

**I**

It's like one of those online personals where the person you see in the photo looks different than the person you see in the flesh. Only it's not my date, it's my daughter. I scan the picture of Rebecca that my ex-wife sent me two months ago, from Rebecca's sixth birthday party, trying to reconcile her with the miniature human the flight attendant brings toward me at the AirTran terminal. This girl looks taller, less sure of herself, a washed-out version of the healthy pink one clutching a Cinderella doll in her picture. Even the doll, tucked under her arm that is not holding the flight attendant's hand, looks disheveled, dirty. I smile and wave like an automaton.

"Here are your princesses, King Dad." The flight attendant, who is poured into a dark blue button-up dress and scarf, beams. Her dark hair is French braided, her makeup worthy of a Mary Kay consultant. She is a woman for whom I'd buy two cosmopolitans at the airport bar if she wasn't handing off the daughter I haven't seen in two years, flown into Florida from Pittsburgh for a DisneyWorld vacation.

"Your coach awaits." I bend and offer Rebecca my arm. She takes it suspiciously, her lip curled slightly. It occurs to me now that this trip might be more stressful than fun for her, and I wonder why my ex, Sara, even allowed it. The Mary Kay model hands me Rebecca's little Cinderella carry on, and Rebecca and I exit Orlando International airport. When we're on the curb outside baggage claims, walking to the garage in the swampy Florida night air, she says her first words to me in months.

"I have to go to the bathroom." She stops in her tracks by the shuttle. The driver opens and closes the door before pulling away.

"You can take her into the men's room," Sara explains over the cell phone as Rebecca and I roam back through baggage claims area. "Ron has taken her before. And they have special bathrooms at DisneyWorld for that."

There seem to be a lot of things I haven't asked Sara, like bathroom etiquette and who Rebecca's surrogate father is these days. I spot the outline of a man on an overhead sign and guide Rebecca to its entrance.

"This is the men's room," she says.

"Sorry, kiddo." I pull her toward the opening, where men of all shapes and sizes meander in and out. Once inside she gapes at the urinals, seemingly forgetting about peeing altogether. A guy in a business suit seems ready to unleash glances back at us.

"Rebecca, come on." I hold the door to a stall open and motion her inside.

"I'm not a boy."

"Let's pretend you're a Brad." I pull her into the stall and close the door behind us.

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"Brad's icky. And you shouldn't be in here."

"Sorry." I squeeze out of the stall and stand on the other side. "I didn't know."

"What's your name?"

"Dad."

"No it's not." I try not to listen to her tinkle. "What's your real name?"

"Jeff," I say. She flushes the toilet. "But you can call me Dad, okay?"

I look back at urinal guy, who looks away. The door opens, and Rebecca comes out with her arms in front of her, like Frankenstein.

"I've got bathroom germs," She explains, moving toward the sinks like a zombie. "Are we going to DisneyWorld now?"

## II

I never thought I'd get married. I never thought I'd be a father. I never thought I'd get divorced. Yet all of these things happened. Sara and I met while DJing at the radio station on campus at the University of Minnesota. She did the show after mine, an 11 pm to 2 am spot, and because I had insomnia, I would often stay an hour or two, commenting on her playlists, discussing classes, talking shit. Sara needed a few more credits to graduate with a BA in history; I was a few credits shy of completing or not completing several majors, an eight-year investment. When my Dad got sick, I went back to Maryland, the first time since freshman year, to be with him, or so I told everyone. Maybe I just wanted to get away. Sara came, too.

"He never finishes anything." My father lay on the couch, wrapped from head to toe in old flannel blankets I found in the upstairs closet. Seemingly everything in the house had gravitated to the living room around his death orbit: blankets, clothing, magazines, cups and dishes, the file cabinet with his insurance information. I sat on a chair in the kitchen, away from its pull. Sara struggled with unfolding a TV tray before placing a bowl of broth on it.

My father picked up his spoon, then put it down. "Biology major. Math major. Art major. English major. Shoulda stayed at school and finished something. Anything."

"He came home for you." Sara picked up the spoon and guided it to his yellowed bile face.

"I'm dead," he said, broth still in his mouth. "He should at least finish something. For his mother's sake."

Later Sara washed the dishes in the sink while I went through my father's medical statements, mortgage, phone bills.

"I'm going to have to sell his car or something." I stacked the bills back in my old Hot Wheels lunchbox where he stored important letters. "There's no money for anything."

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"Jeff, what do you want to do with your life?" She turned to me, wiping her hands on her jeans. In the living room my father snored, wheezed.

"I don't know. Not be here." I put the lunchbox on top of the refrigerator and walked outside, fishing a cigarette out of my shirt pocket. Sara followed, stood next to me, and pulled her hair out of its ponytail, her mid-section rising out of her jeans. I touched the exposed flesh with my palm.

"I want to be with you, Jeff." She pulled a cigarette from my pack and lit it. "I left school for you. But we need to have a plan."

I hadn't asked her to come home with me, and here she was, helping to change my father's diapers, sleeping under my armpit at night in my old twin bed, watching her friends apply to graduate school. In the mornings I'd stare at the Elvis Costello poster above my bed curling precariously off the wall, threatening to cover us, before smoothing it back on my way to the bathroom.

"We should get married," I said one evening. For our one-year anniversary we'd gotten a sitter for my father, my neighbor Mrs. Tomasella, and gone to the Olive Garden. Sara threaded a daisy from the table vase into her hair. Lists went through my head, the lists we'd made during her radio show, best British bands of the 70s, best Blue Note label records, best MTV videos, best wedding songs. Best breakup songs.

"You don't owe me this," she said finally, dipping a breadstick in the little dish of olive oil.

"I love you." I shook my head, laughed as if she were crazy, ordered a brownie sundae dessert with two spoons. "You deserve this."

### III

"I can see it." Rebecca stands up in the monorail, points to the peak of a castle over the treeline. "Do you think Cinderella is awake?"

"Yes." I tug at her backpack to sit down. "She gets up early just like everyone."

"Do you think she'll remember my letter?"

"Of course." I assume that these park actors are quick on their feet. If they're weren't, DisneyWorld wouldn't be the empire it is today. Last night we had a cafeteria-style dinner in one of the restaurants at our Disney-owned hotel. Luckily, Rebecca was more interested in the rumored appearance of a minor Disney character during our meal than wondering who the man was across from her, the one who brought her presents at Christmas and sometimes on her birthday, if he could afford the plane ticket. Maybe she would never care<sup>3/4</sup>maybe it would be Disney-brand anesthesia the entire trip and not any lingering unease about the gift man who called himself Dad.

We are herded out of the monorail by the enthusiasm of our other fifteen compartment riders and join a crowd of families that is slowly separating into five lines for the turnstiles.

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"Are you sure she's going to remember me?" She glances back at me after surveying the crowd, her little lines of brow knitted above her eyes. She looks more like Sara<sup>3/4</sup>except for the brown eyes<sup>3/4</sup>than me.

"She's a princess," I answer. "She'll remember."

"I want to go to the castle right away. There are things I need to tell her."

"Maybe we should wait. Everyone is going to try to go to the castle first. But if we go later they'll be fewer people. Maybe she'll spend more time with us then."

Although she has nothing on which to base her decision, Rebecca accepts my logic, grasping the handles of her backpack tightly as we walk up the main street.

"Will you call my mommy?" She asks when we are almost to the center of the park.

"Mommy's probably at work," I answer, taking her hand. I have caught sight of Tomorrowland out of the corner of my eye and find myself gravitating toward it.

"But I have to tell her things."

"Like what?" I bend down to her height, my hands on each side of her waist. It amazes me that this little person has come out of my sperm, out of my penis, out of me, and I don't feel any more connected to her than any other kid passing us. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I want to tell her I'm in DisneyWorld!" She jumps a little, spins. "I'm here! I'm here!"

"We're here!" I correct, standing and jumping too. I remember that happiness is all that's required for this trip. "We're off to see the mouse man!"

"Mickey mouse, silly." She smiles, and I grab her little hand again.

"Last one to Space Mountain is a rotten egg," I say.

## IV

**W**hen I was thirteen, my dad was a park ranger with the Department of Natural Resources, a job he took when he got back from Vietnam, and we lived in a small two-bedroom house in the Diggs Farm Tract area in Northeast, Maryland. There was no public road, and my dad had to take me to and from school in his state truck. Once a month we'd head over with my mother to Elkton, going east on Route 40. There she'd buy ten-pound bags of rice, two-pound bags of peanuts, whatever spices she could find, and meat and vegetables. At home she'd try to replicate the dishes she learned to make from her mother while in Vietnam, albeit with decided late seventies touches<sup>3/4</sup>spring rolls and stove-top stuffing, peanut rice balls and Good Humor Fudgsicles. Although she knew how to drive the AMC station wagon down the restricted access road to Route 40, she didn't do it often, and my father forbade her most times.

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The thing I remember most about that day was its brilliant fallness¾the cloudless blue sky, the air crisp but warm in the high sun. The way the leaves rested on the restricted road like a box of overturned cornflakes¾almost all the way across, with no cars to come by and sweep them aside. The high hills a few miles ahead seemed to box in the road entirely before every curve. My mother was driving me to the Radio Shack out all the way out in Aberdeen because I had discovered that the 47-kohm resistor I had bought for my 8th grade science project, a radio, was broken, and the project was due the next day.

“You cannot get part another way?” She had asked in the kitchen, where she was chopping carrots, wearing one of her Vietnamese yellow pajama-pant outfit that was I always embarrassed by when she wore them out to town. My father had dropped me off earlier from school and would not be back until after dark. “You not ask your father on the way home?”

“I didn’t know then,” I answered. “Ma, Radio Shack will be closed when he gets home. You don’t want me to fail, do you?”

At the word fail my mother’s ears perked up. She lived in a small village more than an two hours’ south of Saigon and had not much schooling, something my father always took advantage of, even though he barely made it out of high school himself.

“Okay.” She grabbed the keys off the hook, the ones with the plastic No. 1 keychain of a Chinese restaurant she liked in town. “You sit in back. Buckle up.”

My parents wouldn’t let me sit in the front seat which, at thirteen and having broken the pubescence barrier, was becoming an increasing point of contention. But that day, I slid in behind her and pulled the belt across. Mom was taking a big risk driving all the way to Aberdeen, an argument, a beating from my father, even, depending on his mood. I could see the top of her head barely clearing the seat as we coasted down the driveway and slowly turned onto the road.

“Nice day, today. Sun up. Winter soon,” my mother said.

“Can you turn on the radio?” I asked, figuring an hour of my mother’s broken spears of conversation would be the death of one thousand cuts.

“You like this?” She asked as some Led Zeppelin from the classic rock station filled the car.

“Perfect.” I held my thumb up in view of the rearview mirror.

I didn’t care much that day about her yellow pajama pants at Radio Shack, where I carried the resistor in my hand and looked at car stereo systems, daydreaming about an Infinity II system in my imaginary Corvette.

“Your father be home soon,” my mother inched toward the door as some sales associate with a clip-on tie regarded her, hands laced in front of him, like some woodland curiosity.

“Can we stop at McDonald’s?” I held out my change to her, a few dollars. “I want to get some fries.”

“We have hurry. We cannot bring bag home¾your father know. I have

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to get gas also so he don't know we come here."

"There's a gas station across the street." I pointed. "You fill up with gas, and I'll meet you over there. Okay?"

"You be there." She waves her finger. "Or I go without."

I ran up to the McDonald's, seeing the Big Mac, large fries, and shake already in my hands. But at the last minute I downsized my fries, got my mom a hamburger. I didn't know if she'd even eat it (more for me, I figured), but I wanted her to have it, like some medal of honor for courage in science projects.

"Tastes okay," she confirmed from the front seat of the car. "It is good for driving to eat. No mess."

"I can put the trash in my backpack," I explained, smashing the cardboard fry box and Styrofoam Big Mac container together and sliding them into the bag. "That way, he'll never know."

"We sneaky," my mother giggled. "Like spies."

"Yes, with this final piece," I said, holding up the resistor, "we can finally send our transmissions back to the homeland."

The sky unzipped as we turned off Route 40 onto the restricted road, and rain pummeled the car. The windshield wipers, thick as eyeglasses, slowly cleared a small window of visibility.

"Come on, Ma," I said as she let off the gas, unsure. "We have to beat Dad home."

"I know, but hard to see," she answered, giving it a little more gas. The rain lessened somewhat, but still steady, the road covered in shiny leaf skins. My mother unbuckled her seat belt, and it lay prostrate on her left arm. "Need more room to move wheel."

I think I saw the deer before my mom did. It stood paralyzed in the road, as if it had been surprised by the rain as much as we were. The car shuddered and locked as my mom turned the wheel as hard and fast as she could, and we left the main road quickly, bouncing down an embankment thick with trees before rolling<sup>3/4</sup>one continuous roll, with no clear beginning or ending. When we came to a rest I could see the trees sideways from the window of the car, which is how we landed, on our side. I let go of the McDonald's trash, which had glued to my hands in the terror, undid my seat belt, and rolled down my window to climb up and out.

Outside the car I could see the cracked windshield, the big bulls-eye mark above the steering wheel. My mother lay across the front seat, her pajama suit now yellow and red, her hair matted and sticky, her face still, a dab of mustard on the corner of her lower lip. Sometimes in my dreams after the accident she hadn't eaten the hamburger or maybe she was outside of the car or I was inside but she was always like this: dead.

V

The line for Cinderella is longer than any I've seen for Santa Claus. In the castle Rebecca silently holds her Disney-sanctioned autograph book in her hands. All the way over from FantasyLand she talked nonstop about what Cinderella's favorite color was, the comfort of her glass slippers, her relationship with the other princesses, and now as the big event draws closer she is in danger of clamming up. Some of the little children, overwhelmed by meeting the lady of the castle, burst into tears before a photo opportunity could be captured. Others stared numbly into the camera, the enormity of it all overloading the circuits in their still-evolving brains.

"Remember what you want to ask her?" I pat her head. "Remember? Why her stepsisters were so mean? If she has a pony?"

"Do all these kids have Cinderella on DVD?" She asks.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because I thought it was just me," she pouts, dropping her glittery pen on the carpet.

"But if everyone likes her, she must be a really nice lady, like Mommy."

"Can we call Mommy?" Her face lights up as I recover the pen.

"Not now. After." The line moves, and I push her ahead gently.

"Are you going to call your mommy, too?" She turns quickly to face me.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because...she's sleeping."

"You can call her when she gets up." She pats the side of my leg. "Okay?"

Suddenly there is no one between Cinderella and Rebecca. The blonde-haired woman in the blue chiffon gown and cornflower blue silk gloves holds out her arms, beckons Rebecca closer. Rebecca walks unsurely to her and awash in a sea of so many strange women in costumes the past few days, a man pretending to be her father. I don't blame her.

"Do you want to be in the picture, sir?" The photographer, a college-aged girl with fat hands and ruddy cheeks, asks.

"That's my daddy," Rebecca corrects, then adds, so it is understood: "He doesn't live with us."

"I'm fine over here." I wave my hand at the girl, step aside.

"Are you coming tonight to watch the fireworks at my castle tonight?" Cinderella asks Rebecca, her adult body crouched over hers, their faces almost touching, staring ahead.

"I like fireworks okay," Rebecca answers, frowning a little. "But I really, really like noodles."

Cinderella's mouth wavers a little as the flash pops, and the fat-hand photographer decides to take one more, to be sure.

## VI

"I never feel like you're here." Sara sat on the balcony of our apartment, her swollen feet perched on the rail. We were two semesters into her graduate program at University of Pittsburgh and fourth months into her pregnancy. She planned on going back to school after the baby was born, but I didn't want to go back to anything. My job as security guard paid fourteen dollars an hour, more than any job I could imagine with an English degree.

"What do you mean?" I touched her shoulder from behind, dangling a popsicle in front of her with the other hand. "I'm standing right here."

"That's not what I mean." She took the popsicle from me. "You know what I mean."

"I don't."

"Do you want to go talk to someone?"

"About what?"

"About your mother. About your father. About you becoming a father. Me becoming a mother."

"No." I looked at the hundreds of identical lodging squares around us, balconies with limp plants, sun-faded Big Wheels. "Plenty of people have children every day and they do just fine."

"I just worry about you, Jeff." She turned to face me. Sara was the only one I'd ever told about my mother. Sometimes, I regretted even that. A secret that could have died with my father had been resuscitated in my weakness. Why would anyone want to have a child with someone who was responsible for his mother's own death? I could imagine me dropping the baby on the way to the crib, letting her head loll too freely, her neck breaking. I imagined falling asleep and waking up to find the baby suffocated in its crib.

"I'll be fine." I stepped backward into the dark, cool apartment, pulling the glass door between us. I watched her through it, the way her toes clenched the railing. I knew that if she wasn't pregnant, she probably would have left me months ago.

She did leave eventually, around the time of the radio. Germanium diodes, resistors, ceramic earphones, voltmeters lay scattered throughout the apartment. I hadn't told her about the dreams I was having, the ones in which my mother told me I should finish building the science fair radio so that we could talk. But I'm sure Sara sensed some unfinished business with the past. She lie in bed at nights, nursing Rebecca as I sat in the kitchen wrapping wires like a 12-year-old. She left for doctor's appointments without me as I moved the parts around on the balcony, trying to get reception. Finally, she just left.

*When you see a doctor, you can see me,* said the note that was left of her. Of us.

I never saw a doctor. And I never heard from my mother, either. Except one night a few years ago. I had moved to Florida to take a job doing security with SeaWorld. In this dream, she came to me through the car radio.

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She told me about the day she died, about soft landing lights through the windshield of the car from the helicopter, the sound of the propeller, her headache. She told me about the pink fizz cloud dream beyond. She asked for another hamburger. She was always hungry there.

### VII

When we come back to our hotel room we find a baby sparrow crouched by our door.

"Look!" Rebecca points as it scurries back into the bush across from our room. "Is it hurt?"

"No." I pull the room card out of my wallet. "It just hasn't learned to fly yet. It's a fledgling."

"Where is its mommy?" She walks toward the bush, but I grab her shoulder.

"She's around. Come on<sup>3/4</sup>I thought you wanted to go to the pool."

"But we should take her and feed her." She swings back and forth, meeting my eyes. I remember my father telling me that, despite their good intentions, humans usually wound up killing abandoned birds by feeding them the wrong things or imprisoning them in boxes like turtles, stressing them out. But it's hard to tell a six-year-old that.

"We can't do that. It's mommy won't come back for it, then."

"Why not?" She opens her backpack and begins to remove her Disney souvenirs to make room for the bird.

"Rebecca, please leave it alone." I open the door and a blast of arctic, fragrant room air hits me. "Your grandfather was a park ranger. He taught me everything there is to know about birds. It'll be okay, trust me."

She looks behind her, a concerned expression on her face as she enters the room. I pick up her Disney dolls and t-shirts where she has left them on the ground and follow. She says no more about the bird, and we play in the pool with an inflatable beach ball, a snorkeling kit. She hovers around me like algae, plucking the swimming hairs off my forearms. The stalk of her snorkel rests near my chest, the butt and back of her pink swimsuit bob above the waterline like apples.

"Who is your favorite Disney princess?" She asks when she resurfaces, her face close to mine, her eyes expectant before her goggles cloud.

"Cinderella," I answer, the only one I can remember.

"Me too!" She splashes her flippers in approval. "She's my favorite. She doesn't have a mommy or daddy, but she meets a prince. And she has nice friends."

"Hmm, she's a lucky woman." I guide her by the arms to the pool ladder. My fingers are wrinkling and it's getting close to dinner.

"Do you think we could live in DisneyWorld?" she asks as I wrap her, like a burrito, in a terrycloth towel.

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"I think only Cinderella can live in DisneyWorld," I answer, grabbing our tote bag and dropping her flippers and mask into it.

"Can we live close to DisneyWorld?"

"Like, in Orlando, with me? But your mom lives in Pittsburgh."

"I don't want to live in Pittsburgh," she whispers. "I want to live near DisneyWorld. You live here; why can't Mommy and I live here, too?"

"And Ron?" I question.

"Ron is my other daddy, so I guess he should come, too."

It must have happened while I was taking a shower. I told her to sit and watch TV while I got changed from the pool, and then we would call her mother before dinner. But when I emerge, damp and dressed, she is extra protective of her backpack, which she insists upon taking to dinner and sleeping with in the big queen bed next to mine. All night in the dark I hear the zipper of it opening, closing. When she is in the bathroom the next morning, I find it. I had expected to find it. I just wasn't sure whether I expected to find it dead or alive.

Still, I feel tears in my eyes as I open up the backpack and gingerly cup the dead sparrow in my hands. I think of bird diseases, parasites, of Rebecca touching this bird, putting her fingers in her mouth, but I keep it in my hand. It's still slightly warm, relaxed, like its sleeping. I kiss the top of its head before going out in the hall and throwing it into the trash bin. Then I turn Rebecca's backpack inside out so I can wash it.

This task must wait. When Rebecca comes out, toothbrush still in her mouth, I'm crying. She puts her little arms around my shoulders and pats my back as my shoulders heave and my face gets tight.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" she asks.

"Rebecca." I take a deep breath. "The most wonderful thing happened while you were getting ready. Your backpack was moving on the floor and when I opened it up the little sparrow flew out. I tried to catch her in my hands, but then I opened the door, she flew away.

"She did?" Her eyes are like the Fourth of July before falling dark. "But why didn't she say goodbye to me?"

"She probably wanted to get an early start on things," I explain, patting her shoulder. "I don't know how you nursed her back to health, but you did a great job."

"Can I tell my Mommy?" She asks, and I wonder if Rebecca will call me from Pittsburgh, detailing elaborate earthworm rescues, puppy first aid, other disappointments of her young life. I dial my cell phone and hand it to her. Then I open the door of the room, listen to the birds chirp in the courtyard. If one out there is mourning the death of its fledgling, I'd never know it. But maybe death is not so unexpected for them. I make a brim with my hand to cover my eyes from the brightness, but I can't see the birds, chirping, singing. They settle like pricks in my neck, shoulders. When Rebecca appears at the door, ready to go back to the place where dreams come true, I'm ready to take her.

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“Look, there’s Princess Jasmine.” She points at the sky.

“Who?” I scan the bowl of relentless sun above us. I see a flock of birds coasting over our bustop.

“My bird!” She stamps her feet, her hand emerging from her pocket with some crumbly Keebler crackers that survived the trip from Pittsburgh. “I’m leaving some crackers here so she can find her way back.”

I know the grounds crew will be on that cracker pile as soon as we board the bus to the park, but for now I just watch Rebecca putting crumbly pieces in the grass, a line as long as a landing strip. The ground crew doesn’t even need to worry, I discover; as soon as we board the bus, the squirrels are taking care of it.

Jen Michalski’s first collection, *Close Encounters*, is available from So New (2007) and her second is forthcoming from Dzanc (2013). She is the editor of *City Sages: Baltimore* (CityLit Press 2010) and editor of the literary