

Missing Persons

by Josh Closs

The endless desert road was starting to cool off as the sun converged with the horizon. I felt every single one of its bumps and cracks under the tires of this sorry excuse for a truck as I drove along, working hard to keep the speedometer on the right side of not getting pulled over.

God, I wish I'd stolen a truck with cruise control.

I checked the rear-view. Nothing. For that moment, the road was all ours. Hers and mine.

"We're gonna be OK, right?" she asked, surprising me. I hadn't realized she had woken up.

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I looked over at her, trying to size up her mental state. She was playing it cool, but I could see the fear hiding in her eyes. That ten-year-old fear that comes from realizing for the first time that there are big, maybe unsolvable problems in the world. I remembered those days.

I didn't miss those days.

"Yeah," I said, forcing a smile. "We'll be fine. Don't worry. Everything's going according to plan."

"Good," she said. "You just seemed freaked out back at the base, so..."

"I... Yeah. I guess I hadn't remembered how intense it all was," I said. "The gunshots... And when Alex..."

"Yeah, but like you said, it's all part of the plan, right?" she said.

I smiled. "Right," I said. "As if it could be any other way."

"I'm really gonna get to learn how to time travel, too!?" she said.

"Absolutely," I said. "I wouldn't be here otherwise, right?"

"Awesome. Our normal ability is so boring," she said.

I said.

We said?

How do I put this...

My past self, eighteen years removed, said.

And now we're in the middle of her timeline after a dangerous experiment that didn't quite utterly fail.

An experiment that's already taken two lives and left me emotionally shredded.

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Thus, our situation. Fugitives on the run from the only home she'd ever known, praying that nobody from the Institute finds us.

And that she doesn't know I'm making this up as I go.

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“So how far are we from your friend?” she asked, picking at the tears in her Institute uniform. I'd forgotten about the barbed wire. Not my only mistake.

“Huh?”

“Your friend. The one that trained you to time travel, and that's gonna train me!”

“Oh, she's...” I trailed off.

I spotted a motel sign in the distance, its lights struggling to flicker on as the road got darker. It promised a “VACANCY” and not much else. At the moment, though, that's all we needed.

“She's another day's journey away. Should we stop for the night?”

“If that's how the plan goes,” she said.

The plan. Always with the plan. I mentioned it off-hand during the rescue, and now she treats it like gospel. Part of the need for structure that comes from a lifetime in the Institute. Not surprising, but a little annoying.

“To be honest, I don't remember this part very well,” I said. “But as long as we're there by tomorrow night, we should be fine.”

“In that case, sure,” she said. “Is it weird not sleeping in the kids' barracks?”

“It's definitely a lot less noisy,” I said. “You don't have to listen to Lisa's snoring ever again.”

“Awesome,” she said. Then, after a moment to think, with a horrified look on her face: “Wait... You... I mean, we don't snore, do we?”

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“Guess we’ll find out, huh?” I said with a wink as I turned off the highway into the mostly-empty parking lot. “Now, time to put all that training to work.”

“Me, too?” she asked, sitting up in her seat.

“No,” I said. “You’re good, but you’re not ready for a real test yet. Stay here and lock the doors. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

“Good,” I said. “Now. Give me a second.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and shut my eyes, gripping the steering wheel and going through the steps I practiced a million times at the Institute. Focus my energy and my thoughts; picture the final product; feel myself change. Almost painless at this point.

It never feels right, though. Changing who you are is never natural.

“Wow,” she said, staring at me as I opened my eyes. “I don’t even recognize you.”

I smiled. “Step one accomplished, then,” I said, adjusting to my new voice as I checked myself in the mirror. Not bad for working without a reference.

“Your eyes kinda look like that guy you were with, though,” she says.

I checked the mirror again. She's right; I used Alex’s eyes.

With all the time I spent looking at them, I guess I knew them pretty well.

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I still couldn't believe he was gone. This wasn't how it was supposed to go! The four of us were going to escape together, and then he could use his abilities to...

"You can even change your clothes and stuff?" she asked, feeling my generated ratty t-shirt. "Dang, I have a lot to learn."

I blinked. "Not such a boring ability after all, huh?" I said as I ran my fingers through my hair. "Right. Here goes. If anyone comes up to the truck, make sure you hide your face; if they grab you, scream, kick, and bite. Got it?"

"Got it, sir," she said, smiling. No fear this time; only confidence.

I wished I could borrow some of it.

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“Hello?” I said as I entered the motel lobby, trying to ignore the wafting stench of stale tobacco that greeted me as I opened the door. Turns out, that was the best greeting I’d get. The only sound I heard was a TV blaring the local news.

I saw a familiar face on the screen.

“...abducted from her home earlier today,” the anchor said as I stared at my younger self’s face--that horrible, lifeless Institute face, with the picture they took as my “birthday celebration”--captioned with the words “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?? LET AUTHORITIES KNOW ASAP” in huge letters.

“The kidnapper is suspected to be highly dangerous, so please do not try to rescue her yourself,” the anchor continued.

Are you kidding me? The Institute already has enough influence to spin the story so that I’m the “highly dangerous” one in this scenario?

I’m not the one that murdered two people in cold blood today, Institute.

The good news is that I haven't passed out yet, which means they still haven't figured out how to mix the knockout frequency into public broadcasts. It's nice to watch TV without worrying you're about to lose consciousness and be abducted.

“Wow,” the other anchor said as the scene cut back to the studio. “Scary stuff, Mike.”

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“Sure is, Helen,” Mike said. “Our thoughts and prayers are with her and her family.”

Before I had time to make a snide remark to the TV, I was interrupted.

“Can I help you?”

An old man had snuck in and situated himself behind the desk, looking like he had just woken up from a nap. Can't say that I blame him; this place obviously doesn't get too many customers.

Changing his clothes more than once a week might've been a nice bit of professional courtesy, though.

“Lookin' for a room,” I said, walking up to the counter.

“Yes, sir,” he said. As I got closer, I could tell he was the source of the room's scent, both from his rasping voice and his personal aroma. “Just for you, then?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Right,” he said.

“...No,” I said.

“No?”

“Sorry, my kid's in the truck. I'm not used to travelling with him, but my wife's real sick, so...”

“Sure, sure,” he said, cutting off my fake sob story. “It's forty bucks for a two-bed room. Checkout's at ten, or else I'll assume you're staying another night. We know channel 6 ain't workin', so don't bother ringin' the front desk about it. Anything else?”

“Any chance at a continental breakfast in the morning?” I asked.

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He glared at me.

Fair.

“Right,” I said, reaching for my wallet. “Cash is fine?”

“Fine by me,” he said as I pulled out two twenties and handed them to him.

“Anything else I should know?” I asked.

“Don’t make too much noise and we’ll get along fine,” he said, taking the cash and handing me a key. “You’ll be in 119. Enjoy your stay.”

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“Success?” she asked as I re-entered the truck.

“Success,” I said as I tossed her the room key and started the engine. “After I pull the truck around and get in there, I should be clear to change back.”

“How do you maintain it for so long?” she asked. “I still can’t last for more than a minute.”

“It’s all about energy management,” I said. “You listen for the things that are about to fail and do just enough to keep them going.”

“Sounds hard,” she said.

“Truth,” I said, parking the truck out of view from the road. “C’mon, let’s see where we’re sleeping.”

Almost leaping out of the truck, she raced to unlock the door and explore; I followed behind with our backpacks.

The room was...

Well, it sure was a room.

The lobby scent’s little brother is here, with an added dose of general funk. The light switches’ faceplates are all missing, along with the TV remote, and the bedding looks about as old as I am.

Ugh.

She deserves better than this.

“Look, I can ask if there's another...” I started to say, but she interrupted me.

“...This is ours?” she asked, shutting the door behind us. “And we won’t be interrupted by any wardens?”

Right.

She's never had a room to herself.

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She's never had the chance to sleep without the fear of a training drill.

Or worse.

God, what they did to Paige...

"No wardens in sight," I said with a grin, melting back into my normal form. "Just you and me."

"This is amazing!" she said. "And that TV, does it show normal people TV shows? Can we watch whatever we want!?"

"Totally," I said. "Looks like you'll have to figure out how to work it without a remote, though."

While she worked on figuring out the set's mechanics, I made sure the curtains were shut and swept the room for any sign of bugs--the surveillance kind, mostly, but also keeping an eye out for any ants or their ilk. After a thorough search, I found no sign of either. The Institute is powerful, but even they don't have their fingers everywhere.

Not yet, at least.

"Hey, look!" she said. "We've got power!"

The TV buzzed to life, showing a cooking show of some sort. She stared at the screen, awestruck.

"That looks so good," she said, staring at some sort of pasta dish that probably has a name I should know.

"Bet that tastes better than the nutrient paste, huh?" I said.

"Way better!" she said. "Can we go get some real food? Or do we have to keep eating our rations?"

"Um," I said.

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I didn't want to shoot down her dreams, but I didn't think I had the energy to disguise myself in public long enough to pick up food, so...

Wait! Idea!

"Hang on," I said, grabbing the phonebook and flipping to the P section. "Instead of going to get the food, we can have the food delivered to us."

"Seriously!?" she said. "Geez, living on the outside is so cool!"

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I considered asking her what kind of pizza toppings she'd like, but soon realized two flaws with that plan. One, she doesn't have any idea what they taste like; and two, I know her tastes like I know my own, so I can order what I want and it'll be fine. I found an ad for a place that promises to deliver to this motel, so I called them, placed an order for a large with Canadian bacon and sausage, gave them the room number, and hung up.

"Well?" she asked.

"Should be here in thirty minutes," I said, pulling out my wallet to double-check our finances. No problem. "Think you can wait that long?"

"Ooh, I'll try!" she said, perched on the edge of the bed and leaning in close to the TV. "Lemme see what else I can find!"

I sighed and smiled. Hard to believe I was ever this hopeful, even back then.

I guess that's how I survived for so long.

I sat down next to her. "Go on," I said. "Let's see what's good."

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Half an hour of channel-surfing later, there was a knock at the door.

“You know what to do, right?” I asked.

“Yup,” she said, heading for the bathroom. “If they ask questions, I’m super-sick... Dad. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said, closing my eyes and going through the process again.

I considered just changing my face and hiding the rest of myself behind the door, but there’s too much room for error there. Instead, I went back to my full-fledged transformation from before, grabbed my wallet, and opened the door.

Big mistake.

As I greeted the pizza guy, I felt my energy sapping away; I’d used more of it in the lobby than I thought. This’d need to be quick.

“Hey,” I said.

Right. What can I lose? I can let my lower half switch back; unless he’s staring at my crotch, that won’t be an issue.

“Hi,” the pizza guy said, carrying the oh-so-tempting cardboard box. “That’ll be \$13.51.”

I handed him a twenty. “Keep the change,” I said, sticking my hand in my pocket and letting it switch back.

“Thanks,” he said, handing me the box and pocketing the money. “So, what brings you around this part of the country?”

Oh, come on.

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“Uhh,” I said, feeling my voice strain as it shifted back to my real one.

“Daddy, my tummy really hurts!”

Hallelujah. A saving grace from the toilet.

Not a phrase I thought I’d ever use, but whatever.

I awkwardly nod towards the bathroom, praying that my changing eye color and back half of my hair returning would be taken as tricks of the light.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I’ll let you have your privacy.”

I gave him a nod and shut the door as my body melted back to its normal form.

I lean against the closed door, panting for breath as I scramble to lock all of the locks one-handed, still carrying the pizza box. As I do, I hear the delivery guy’s car drive away.

“Shit,” I said, staggering over to the nearer bed after I finish.

“We swear when we grow up!?” my younger self asked, coming out of the bathroom.

“...On special occasions, we do,” I said, smiling. “Like when we almost blow our cover.”

Her eyes got huge. “You don’t think he...”

“No,” I said. “Even if he did, I don’t think he’d connect me to the kidnapping. We should be fine.”

“OK,” she said. “Good.”

She didn’t look convinced, though.

“Is... is this how it happened according to the plan?”

“...Pretty much,” I said. “Like, ninety percent the same.”

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She gave me a dubious look.

“C’mon,” I said, opening the box and setting it on the bed. “Pizza time! Dig in!”

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I think if we could gather any two opposing forces around a pizza, we could solve a lot of our world problems. It's hard to be mad when you're chowin' down on a good slice.

After initial trouble figuring out the mechanics and a little coaching from me on the art of the fold, my past self took a big bite, chewed, swallowed, and gave the biggest smile I'd ever seen.

"This is amazing," she said, eyes wide with joy. "Is this what they were trying to copy with the nutrition paste? Because they totally blew it!"

"I know, right?" I said, taking a bite of my own slice. "And this isn't even the best stuff. Wait 'til we can try Perducci's!"

"Is that another pizza place?" she asked, the word "pizza" sounding foreign as she spoke it.

"Yep!" I said. "Alex and I would go there after we..."

Well.

There it was.

One slip of the tongue and it's gone.

Illusion shattered. Irreparably.

"...Alex?" she said. "But, he..."

"He's dead" was the unspoken part she didn't say.

She didn't need to.

Her eyes said it.

She wasn't dumb. She'd put it together. She'd probably been suspecting it since we left the Institute, to be honest.

"Listen," I said. "I... I've been lying to you about some stuff."

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“Lying?” she asked. The word stuck me like a dagger.

“This whole... scenario,” I said, “the escape and everything? It didn’t happen to me when I was your age. I don’t really get the physics of the time travel, but... right now, we’re on a different track than the one I took, basically. In my reality, I was stuck in the Institute until I turned eighteen. After that, Alex found me and proposed a scheme where we went back together to get the two of you--our past selves--out of the Institute at an early age and start building a resistance here and now, before they have too much power. He was the one with the time travel powers, so he picked to come now instead of earlier; I was just tagging along. I guess it was a good plan, but...”

“So that’s who that guy was.”

“Yeah.”

“...But he’s dead now,” she said. “Both of him.”

“Yeah.”

“...Why did you lie to me? Why did you say you had the time travel powers?”

“I thought... I thought if you believed it was possible, then it would be,” I said. “That if you thought I could time travel, then you’d have the strength to do it.”

She looked at me.

It’d be one thing if she were mad, but she just looked at me, trying to process this new information.

“I fucked up,” I said. “OK? That’s how bad this is. I fucked it all up, but I’m going to try and do better.”

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“...Are we even really going somewhere?” she asked.
“Is there somebody that’s going to help us?”

“Fair question,” I said. “Yes. Her name is Zelda. She was one of the founders of the Institute, back when it was trying to help kids like us, instead of controlling us. She’s doing the same thing now, but in secret. If we can get to her, she can help us.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time. Now, instead of staring me down, she focused on the TV or her pizza, refusing to make eye contact with me.

Did she trust me?

Could I blame her if she didn't?

What would I do if she didn't?

What would she do?

Finally, though, she turned to me with a smile.

“I mean... if I can’t trust myself, who can I trust?”

I didn’t know what to say for a moment. Then, I wrapped her up in a hug.

“Thank you,” I said.

She hugged me back.

For that moment, I knew everything was going to be OK.

Then a pounding knock came at the door.

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“Child Protection Service,” a booming voice called from the other side of the door.

“Warden,” she said in a hushed voice, staring at the door.

“Your license plate matches that of a kidnapper of a highly-wanted young person. Open the door now or we shall be forced to knock it down!”

Every nerve in my body froze.

“I... I...” I said, looking down at her. “I can’t transform again. I’m out of energy. I...”

“I know,” she said, speaking with unflappable poise. “Go hide and shut the door. I’ll take care of it.”

“But...” I said.

Another pounding at the door.

“Hey,” she said with a smile, “trust you.”

I smiled back. “Right,” I said, heading for the bathroom. “Good luck.”

“Don’t need it,” she said, closing her eyes and starting to transform. “I’ve got you in my corner.”

I hunkered down in the bathroom, listening from behind the closed door. I considered hiding behind the curtain of the shower/tub combo, but I was afraid my shoes would make too much noise against the floor, so I just leaned my ear against the closed door and listened.

Here’s what I heard:

Another pounding at the door.

The door opened.

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“What do you want?” A pitch-perfect copy of the voice I used earlier.

“Good evening, sir; we have reason to suspect that there is a...”

“I’m sorry, but could you not do this right now? I’ve had a hell of a day, and I don’t have time for any more shit.”

(We’ll have a talk about her using that sort of language later.)

“Of course, sir, we were just...”

“You were just what? You think I’m hiding a kid in here or something? It’s just me and my son, OK? And he’s in the bathroom with some terrible stomachache from this pizza. Smells I can’t even describe. You want in on this business?”

“Even so, sir, we must make a thorough investigation.”

A pause.

“...No, you don’t.”

Another pause.

“You’re right, sir, we don’t. Thank you for your cooperation. Have a good evening.”

I heard the door shut.

I opened the bathroom door to find her back in her normal form, staggering back over to the bed. I rushed over to help steady her, holding a finger to my lips until I heard the Institute van drive away.

“Oh my God!” I said, squeezing her close to me. “You did it! You’re so amazing!”

“More pizza,” she said. “And water. And TV.”

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“Of course,” I said, setting her down on the bed. “You earned, like, twenty pizzas for that performance. What did you even do there at the end?”

“I just... y’know how Lisa would convince people sometimes? I just did what she did, and...”

“...But how do you know how to do that?” I asked.

“I faked it,” she said, grinning. “Made him think he’d seen what I said he’d see. More pizza now?”

“Yes, absolutely,” I said, holding the box in front of her.

“Sorry for speaking ill of you, pizza,” she said, grabbing another slice. “You don’t deserve that kind of slander.”

She was regaining her normal energy.

For the first time in years, I was, too.

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After all of the pizza was gone, our teeth were brushed, the TV stopped entertaining us, and we were confident the Institute wasn't going to be knocking on our door again, at least for a little while... we decided to get some sleep.

That was the intention, at least. My brain had other ideas.

Thousands of ideas fired off without a particular coherence to any of it. Ideas about saving the world. Ideas about not living in fear.

Thirty minutes or so after I turned the lights off, I heard a voice.

"Are you sleeping?"

"...No," I said.

"Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Yeah," I said, sliding away from her to make room.

"Come on over."

She crossed the gap between us and crawled under the sheets, wrapping her arms around me. I remembered when I would do this with Mom before we were separated. This was different, of course, but it was familiar enough that it filled me with those same warm and fuzzy feelings.

I stroked her hair--my hair--and felt her breath against my shirt.

"What's it like being a grown-up?" She asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," I said.

"Have you kissed anyone?"

"Yes," I said.

"Lots of people?"

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"I wouldn't go that far."

"Alex?"

"...Yes."

"I'm sorry he died," she said.

"Me, too."

"Is Zelda nice?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"And we'll reach her tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said.

"And are we going to beat the Institute together?"

I smiled.

THE END