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The Excursion, An Excerpt from The Silk Road



In the beginning we lived on Fairmount Avenue. Our house was in a row of houses, all of them once grand. Even now you could tell how grand they'd been from the size of the windows, too big for the curtains people on the side streets put up, as well as from the fact that the houses had names like Falkenstein and Versailles and Kenilworth. Our house had been grand when our father was a boy—he was born in the bed he now slept in with our mother. Nanny was the one who raised him. She'd been young then, not much more than a girl. According to our mother, everything that was wrong with our father could be pinned to Nanny, though why our mother had kept her on, allowing her to work her magic on us, is anybody's guess.

There was a prison in the neighborhood not far from our house and when we lived there it still had prisoners in it. Only later did the prison get turned into a haunted house at Halloween with people paying money to be scared to death; the rest of the time it was empty. When we were children we used to go out where the prisoners could see us. Father made a smile for each of our faces with a melon slice and he made one for himself even though he wasn't happy. After they locked the prisoners up they threw away the key, Mother said, and she showed us a key in a gold cigarette case. Poor things, she said. They need something pretty. She would put on her pearl necklace and stand at the Morning Room window, smoking.

Back then we had no idea where we were headed. We were children, some of us good as angels and some of us bad, but none of us really bad, none of us evil devils like the men we'd see lined up in the yard in their striped prison garb, chained together at the ankle. Maybe we got that from the movies. It wasn't until later that we became things with names, a Geographer, a Cook, an Astronomer, etc., though people were always asking what we wanted to be when we grew up, as if what we already were was meaningless. We would never have said Murderer.

Mother went out in the evenings; every morning Father went to work. The entire neighborhood consisted mostly of grand houses not unlike our own, houses three stories tall with a back entrance and a set of back stairs for the servants, though the only servant we had was Nanny. The prison had always been there; it was, in its own way, a grand edifice of red brick with turrets and crenellations, designed by the same famous architect who designed the university buildings. Usually the prisoners were kept under strict control, but Father remembered a stone coming through the Morning Room window one day; he had been a little boy then. What's the big idea, he remembered Nanny saying.

That was the question, really. The thing is, we were all caught in the flood of time but without a back-pool or sluggish eddy or swamp-root or *anything* to catch on, get a grip on, make into ourselves.

As for the excursion, it's unclear whose idea it was, only that it was unusual—without precedent or recurrence—for all of us to go out together at the same time. The town car wasn't big enough and it belonged to Mother: she didn't want us spilling food in it or, worse, throwing up. Several of us suffered from carsickness and her cigarette smoke didn't help.

No, it was decided. We would take the train. We would take it to the end of the line and then we'd get out and walk.

Where we were going was to be a surprise.

Naturally, years later, we didn't all remember it the same way. The day wasn't fine, the train practically empty, the station we got off at made of stone. One of us couldn't find the bathroom and wet their pants. Aside from these details, though, there was little agreement. The woman hanging laundry who waved her rail-thin arms at us frantically as we sped past—it had to have been an emergency for her to wave her arms like that, but most of us didn't remember her at all. Were we given jelly omelets in the dining car? Going through a tunnel, the train blew its whistle and someone touched someone inappropriately. The hill we climbed after leaving the station—was it so steep Mother decided to stay in the restaurant at the foot of it rather than accompany us to the top? Father was furious; he drove his fist through the powder room door. There was no powder room. Mother got to the top before any of

us. The view from the top was of a lake so wide it might have been the ocean. The view from the top was of our city. The view from the top was shrouded in mist. The rain was driving down.

Something was always driving down, though it wasn't always the same thing. Rain, sleet, snow, hail.

Think of the prisoners, Mother said. She was agitated—we all remembered that.

At least they're not standing in the pouring rain, said Father, removing his hat to wring it out.

There were piles of stone atop the hill, trail markers, spaced equidistant from one another and leading across the summit and down the other side, which we couldn't see. We walked in pairs, holding hands, so as not to get lost.

Two by two, like onto the Ark, said the Keeper.

Like in our favorite book, *Madeline*. The girls' favorite book, that is. The boys loved a comic called "Prince Valiant," which was about a Nordic prince from Thule who seemed able to travel with equal ease through space and time.

The Astronomer hadn't been paired with anyone that day; this was because someone always had to walk with Mother. Two by two onto the Ark except for poor, lonely Monoceros, he said. He was referring to the constellation on the celestial equator whose name is Greek for unicorn—it consists of three stars forming a seemingly fixed triangle barely visible to the naked eye. The most beautiful sight in the heavens, according to the man who discovered it. Like all the constellations, it doesn't look a bit like the thing it was named for.

But I was *with* you, Jee Moon said. I've always been with you.

The Topologist drew a shape in the air with her finger. What the coordinates describe is an abstraction, she said. Say you're in a spaceship and you start going in one direction for a very long period of time. You could hit a wall. You could keep going forever. Or you could end up back where you started, but you wouldn't know it.

Exactly, said Jee Moon.

The day of the excursion the Botanist was still a baby and had to be nursed; until we got to the restaurant this constituted a hindrance.

The fad for breast-feeding was a fairly recent one. Most of us had been bottle-fed and, as Nanny was quick to point out, none the worse for it. They used to have special nursing rooms for mothers with babies—often these rooms were attached to the lavatory. The boys were roughhousing and the place was fancy, damask tablecloths, real silverware, and waiters dressed in black waistcoats and trousers, wearing sneers on their faces and their aprons low on their hips. Why our mother decided to bring us to a place like that is a mystery.

But it was Mother's birthday!

We had escargots. Escargots meant snails, if only we knew what was going on.

We could die from happiness, if only we knew.

That's when Father put his fist through the powder room door, said the Geographer. Not earlier.

If he ever did such a thing. The Archivist was Father's champion, both of them Virgos, not that easy to get along with though delicate, a delicate nature stretched and then suspended above the fathomless abyss.

We dipped them in butter, said the Cook. Snails are delicious dipped in butter.

Anything is delicious dipped in butter, said the Keeper.

When she was a little girl, the Botanist used to bring garden slugs in from the backyard and feed them saltines. Remember? That was how it worked, the Geographer said, the kindest acts spawning disastrous outcomes.

Still, how did she get there? Our mother, that is. Did she climb the hill in her designer high heels? The ones that gave her bunions? It's almost impossible to imagine. Conversely, how did *we* get there, back to her? The whole point of the excursion was to celebrate her birthday, after all. Not everyone remembered the hill, though those who did remembered it vividly. The trail was slippery from the rain. The Topologist lost her footing on the way down, breaking her fall with her right hand, abrading the palm and spraining her wrist. She cried through most of the birthday meal. Remember? The Archivist pretended to wipe tears from his eyes, sniffing.

Only I never fell, replied the Topologist. *You* were the one who fell.

Tensions always ran high between those two, the one dedicated to the preservation of *materia mundi*, the other to proving its immateriality. Otherwise they were very much alike, both of them OCD, the Topologist's painstaking arrangement of game pieces on the hearthstone neatly swept up by the Archivist and stored in the wooden box in the middle drawer of the bachelor chest where they belonged.

We had rack of lamb, said the Cook. Overdone. With mint jelly, he added, and smiled at the Botanist, who loved sweets. You weren't a vegetarian back then, he reminded her.

Mealtimes were always the happiest times we spent together, Mother and Father seated at opposite ends of a table, making contention between them difficult if not impossible. Dear Heart, she called him at such moments. It was a restaurant, though—not everyone ate the same thing. Mother ordered *confit de canard*, Father prime rib au jus.

Was it a French restaurant?

What difference would that make?

All the difference in the world, said the Cook.

As long as it wasn't in France, said the Archivist.

And why is that, Mr. Smartypants? The Botanist loved to bait him, and we all loved to watch his reaction.

We need to know where everyone was, the Archivist said. All those times when we were on our own, with other people, in other places. We need to know these things if we're ever going to figure out what happened back there in the labyrinth.