

When Aaron had finished his tale, the light in his eyes still dancing and his small body reluctantly falling still, all of our company clapped vigorously, cheered by the hope of the young soul's words.

"That was a wonderful tale," said Charli, the next to speak, as she lifted her head from her knees. "I'm sorry that I do not have such a happy story for you. My death has made me remember a story that I heard a long time ago. I do not know where I heard it, but it was probably from my neighbor. She collected odd tales and told them so often that they stopped being odd." Charli looked upwards. "I am trying to decide where to start." After a moment she began.

Brett was old. There was really no getting around the fact. But he wasn't old in a way that made you feel bad for him, because he was energetic and talkative and always going somewhere. Brett had lived all his life in Town and had built its only grocery store. He had seen a whole generation of kids grow up and move away before his wife died and everything changed. On that day, when he got the call from the hospital, he found a box full of maps and a beat up dart set that had been dumped by the garbage can behind his store. People were always dumping their old stuff there, and he always went through it, but he had never found anything as peculiar as this.

A couple of months later, when people saw that that faraway look was finally starting to fade out of his eyes and everyone was saying to each other "I saw Brett this afternoon and he's starting to look better," or, "I really think he's

going to be alright,” he did something very peculiar. He plastered the wall of the store behind the counter with maps, took a handful of darts, threw them at the maps and set out for where the darts had landed. On a cool night several months later he returned, but by the next morning he was gone, the darts resting in a new set of locations. This pattern continued for five years.

When Brett was gone the store was left in the hands of the only employee of Brett’s Grocery: Archer. While her employer was only occasionally lost, when he made a wrong turn or drove past his exit, Archer was lost all of the time. She had left all she had known – high school – when she graduated the year before, and had absolutely no idea where she wanted to go. So she stayed in one place, as if remembering the advice to stay in one place if she ever get lost in the woods, so someone had a better chance of finding her.

She didn’t mind working, except for the mornings when Brett was there. Brett would arrive at the store, always at night, and sleep in the back office. The next morning she would find him curled up on the futon he had dragged into the store several years ago, or maybe awake sipping coffee at the counter, handling the store’s more complicated financial aspects. Archer couldn’t stand seeing him in any state. She couldn’t stand the fact that he was going to these places for what seemed to her to be absolutely no reason at all. It bothered her even more that he acted as if these trips were purposeful. It really just gave her this terrible feeling.

There was one thing that made up for Brett: the children. Children who were dragged into the store by their parents, to buy boring things, like Leseur peas and Wonderbread, or who were the ones doing the dragging, having convinced their parents to buy more exciting things, like ice cream. She loved watching them because each of them still had a chance to leave town. Their parents, they were doomed. Their grandparents and uncles and aunts, hopeless. But they still had this tiny shimmering little opportunity to get out and do something.

One morning, one of these children, Jerry, burst into the store with his mother. They came every afternoon to buy a blueberry Danish for Jerry, which was usually all over his face before they had even gotten up to the counter. They were early today. Archer smiled at them from behind the counter and Jerry waved, then Archer went back to her book. Suddenly there was a huge crash from the back of the store, a shattering of glass and a yelp from Jerry's mother. Archer jumped in surprise and fell back against the wall, landing on the floor in a cascade of darts.

When she had struggled up and gotten around the counter she could see what the cause of the noise had been – a small sea of blueberry preserves was spreading into one aisle from where it had been sitting, carefully contained in a display of glass jars. Jerry was crying noisily, oblivious to his mother who was inspecting him for injury. Jerry's mother apologized and offered to pay, but Archer knew Brett would never take money for something like this and

convinced Jerry's mother that this was true. Then Jerry's mother made Jerry apologize. He squirmed uncomfortably, his face bright red and his eyes puffy and whispered, "I'm sorry," in the tiniest voice.

"She can't hear you!" Jerry's mother snapped.

He repeated himself, his face parallel to the floor. His mother led him out and Archer cleaned up the mess with the mop that was kept in the back closet.

Archer did not remember the darts until the next day, when she stepped on one behind the counter. She cursed silently. She hated messing with any of Brett's stuff. She almost never went into the back office, because he always left things strewn about across the desks and the futon. And these darts were the most important thing in the whole store.

She tried to picture where they had been, running her eyes over the locations. The majority of the maps were from the United States. Close-ups of Wyoming and Florida, with the names of towns she had never heard of and would forget several minutes later. But there were a few maps from the rest of the world. They were smaller, more faded. England was pasted beside North Dakota. China between Nevada and Maine. She had never really paid that much attention to the maps, because they gave her the same kind of funny feeling that she got watching Brett's back move away from the store. She passed one of the darts back and forth between her hands and set it down. She looked at the maps some more, wondering where Brett was. Maybe if she put the darts in the maps he wouldn't notice they were in the wrong spots before he took them out of the

wall. She let one fly. It landed with a solid-sounding *thick* in her own state, in a town not far from where she was. She threw another and then the rest. She stepped forward, climbing onto her stool so she could inspect where they had ended up: all in her own state and the two states bordering it. She laughed to herself. What were the odds, she thought. Then she noticed the last dart. It had flown off in an odd direction and landed in Spain. She climbed down and opened up a box of canned peas to start stocking the shelves.

When Archer pulled into the store in the early hours of the new morning, Brett's car was sitting there. She went inside, suddenly exhausted, her head clouded by that *feeling*, and opened the door without using her keys. Brett was behind the counter, leaning easily against its edge and sipping some coffee. He looked up as she came in and the bell above the door announced her.

"Good morning," he said, turning back to look at the maps.

She said the same, coming to the front of the counter and setting down her bag. No matter how long she worked there, she never went behind the counter when Brett was around. When she was alone the store always felt like it was hers, in a way, but that illusion vanished when Brett was there, and its sudden disappearance made her uneasy.

"Where are you headed?" he asked, still looking at the maps. Archer remembered the darts.

"Oh, I'm sorry about the darts. I fell over and knocked them off. Jerry, you know, that kid who lives on Maple Street, well he knocked over this big thing of

blueberry stuff, it made me jump and that's when I knocked into them. I didn't make his mom pay for it. I hope you don't mind."

Brett said that of course he didn't mind. He went into the back office.

Archer pulled nervously at her bag. "Where are you going today?" she yelled back to him.

"I'm going to stay in town for a while," he yelled back.

Archer froze and walked over to the doorway of the office. "What?" she asked.

"I'm not going to go anywhere for a while." He was rummaging through his desk and came out with a pair of scissors. He walked past her and started opening some of the boxes of canned food.

"Why?" Archer demanded, still standing in the same spot.

He looked up at her and replied "I didn't throw the darts."

"Well, you don't expect me to go anywhere!" Archer shrilly replied.

Brett laughed and went on with the boxes. "Those darts, they're fate. You don't mess with fate darlin'."

Archer steamed silently. As if she had the money to go anywhere. As if she could just get up and leave. Not everyone could do that, could do what he did. She could not shake that terrible feeling for the rest of the morning, which was only made worse by Brett, who buzzed around the store doing a million little things she had meant to do.

That afternoon Jerry and his mother came in. Archer hadn't expected to see them for a while. They had both been so embarrassed. She wouldn't have come. She and Jerry's mother said hi, and Jerry glanced up but did not say anything, at least not before Brett pounced on them. When Brett hadn't been fixing the blinds or restocking the shoe polish, he had been talking to people all morning. He loved to talk to people and people loved to talk to him. Jerry's mother had a long conversation that Archer refused to listen to, and then she heard "blueberry" and looked up. Jerry's mother was explaining what had happened and was offering again to pay and Brett was explaining that he had already heard and that she shouldn't worry about it, just as Archer had told her. Then he told Jerry not to worry about it, but Jerry just looked more embarrassed, his face flushing as red as it had been the day before. When Jerry and his mother finally came up to check out, Jerry's blueberry Danish sat untouched in its wrapper on the counter and Jerry stood shamefaced and silent.

Archer couldn't stand it. She couldn't stand seeing that little kid with that look of utter defeat. Because that was the kind of look that only belonged on the faces of adults. It was the kind of look that she loved kids for never having. As Jerry walked out the door with his mother, Archer had the sudden panicky feeling that that kid, that Jerry, wouldn't get out after all. That all of the kids she depended on would someday knock over some display somewhere and get that look and never recover. Her stomach churned. The feeling was unbearable.

She swiveled on her stool and looked at the maps. A dart had landed in a town that was only a forty-minute drive from where they were. Why couldn't she go there? Just to get away from the store. Just for the afternoon. She glanced over at Brett, who was humming to himself while he put price stickers on canned corn. He owed her. She had practically run the place for five years. She picked up her coat. "Can I check out early? I have to go to the dentist this afternoon and it would be great if I could drop by my house first."

"Sure," Brett said cheerily.

Archer put on her coat and left.

She tried not to think about what she was doing when she pulled out onto the road and drove towards the town. There was a large part of her that felt like an idiot. But the feeling was lifting, gradually, a little more with each tree she passed and as her mind was silenced by the steady humming of her old car. She should have been thinking a little more maybe, because suddenly something flashed in front of her that she had not seen coming. She swerved and her car went off the road, hitting a tree. She was thrown forward, but not far enough for the airbag to blow up. *Bummer* she thought numbly – she had always wanted to see an airbag blow up. In those commercials with the dummies, where the cars crash into a brick wall, the airbags looked like mushrooms growing on hyper speed. They were kind of graceful. She always loved those commercials.



When she snapped to, she jumped out of the car. She didn't hurt anywhere until she got a good look at the front of the hood. It was destroyed. Then she felt as if she had been punched in the stomach.

"Are you alright? Jesus, are you okay?" Someone was running towards her and she turned to look. It was a middle-aged woman she had never seen in the store before. Her left leg was wrapped up in this big clumsy cast and she was coming down off the porch of a big house. Archer realized that she had crashed on someone's lawn – this woman's lawn.

The woman got to her, hobbling quickly and dangerously, and looked her up and down for several minutes, saying, "Are you okay? Does your neck hurt? What happened?"

"I crashed. There was a thing in the road. I dunno what it was." Archer glanced over her shoulder, suddenly terrified that she would see this woman's poor dog or cat run over on the road, but there was nothing there.

"Are you okay?" the woman repeated, touching Archer's arm to regain her attention.

"Yeah, I'm O.K. I don't hurt anywhere."

"Thank God," the woman sighed, letting go of Archer and stepping back. "Listen, come inside and you can call someone. I'll give you something to drink or eat. Thank God my ankle's broken. If it hadn't been, I'd be in New York by now, waiting to fly half way around the world, and you would have had to walk a mile just to get to the nearest phone. I'm Camilla by the way." The woman had

already turned to go inside and walked up the hill with a surprising amount of grace. Archer followed her, figuring that she looked normal enough to trust.

The woman's house was beautiful. It was one of those on the border of town with lots of property, so it was a lot more expensive than anything Archer had been in, or grown up in for that matter. It was painted odd colors that you would never think of putting together but were perfect side by side, and everything was covered with objects that fit so well, were so far from being meaningless clutter, that they looked as if they had come into existence in that house instead of being brought there from all over, as Archer supposed they had been.

The woman walked into the kitchen and picked up the phone, poised to dial. "Is there someone at your college that can come get you?"

Archer's face burned. "I'm not in college. I live in town. With my parents. One of them can come get me."

Camilla examined Archer the way she had when she ran to the car, as if she had suddenly been made aware that there were a whole new set of wounds to be worried about. She set down the phone and moved over to the cabinets and started pulling down jars of teas and coffee beans. "Listen, what do you want to drink?" she asked.

"I'm fine really, I'll just call my parents." Archer moved towards the phone.

“Go ahead.” Camilla said, her head in the cabinet.

Archer picked up the phone and moved into the next room. Her eyes roamed over the walls as the phone rang on the other end. There were photographs everywhere, many of them black in white. She couldn't help moving closer to look at them. There was a house with potted plants and a beautiful door. The door stood slightly open and a woman was stepping out of it, looking over her shoulder, her hand grasping that of a small child, a girl with dark curly hair and baby cheeks. The child stared at the camera, at Archer. Archer stared back.

“Hello?” her mother said.

Archer jumped back from the picture.

“Hi, mom.” She told her mother what had happened and where she was. When Archer moved into the kitchen to hang up the phone, Camilla was still in the cabinets.

“I grew up in town down on Chester street. The house isn't there anymore,” Camilla said. “It was torn down after I moved into my dorm and my parents sold it. I miss it. I've been all over – I went traveling during college. You have to pick a major that gives you an excuse to travel, you just really have to – and there's really no place that gives you that feeling that you get when your feet are on your own floors.” She finally found what she was looking for, skillfully placed everything else back and moved to a different cabinet to begin digging all

over again. “A lot of my friends were like you. Didn’t get out after high school.” She drew out a teapot and looked over her shoulder. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Just takes some people longer than others.” Her hands worked busily on the tea and finally she turned around. “You have that look. You want to get out of Town.” Archer was frozen still. She didn’t respond, because she didn’t know if she was insulted. The two of them looked at each other for a long time. Finally the tea kettle started singing and Camilla turned, picked it up and poured the tea into two cups. She handed a cup and saucer to Archer, without spilling even the tiniest bit despite her awkward walk, and then moved over to the table to sit down. Archer hovered by the phone, her hands grasping the saucer unsteadily. She didn’t know what she would get herself into if she sat down with this woman, but her wrist was starting to shake with the weight of the full cup and finally she moved over to the table.

“So where were you going? When you crashed?” Camilla asked, sipping her tea noiselessly. Archer stared at her.

“Out of town.”

“Yes, well I can assume that. Where specifically? And why?”

Archer bristled. Her eyes flicked away from Camilla, and pushed on over her shoulder into the room with the photos. Archer could see the photo of the woman and child. The girl was still staring at her. Archer sipped her tea again

and thought about how after her mother picked her up she would probably never see Camilla again in her whole life.

“I was going up by the river, you know, where those big condos are? And the little shops? My boss – I work at Brett’s Grocery. Have you ever been there?”

Camilla shook her head.

“Well, my boss, Brett, he has this wall. It’s covered in maps and he throws these darts at it. And then he drives, or flies or whatever, to the places where the darts land. A couple of days ago I knocked all the darts off by accident and I decided to throw them back because I was hoping he wouldn’t notice that I’d knocked them off. And then I had this really awful day today and Brett told me it was fate that I threw the darts and that I shouldn’t mess with it, which sounds silly I know, but I decided I’d drive out to where one of the darts was so I could get away from the store. And then I crashed.”

Camilla kept on examining Archer after she was done speaking, her cup held just below her chin and her long nose breathing in its honeyed smell. She put down her cup. “That is ridiculous,” she said.

Archer glanced up, and the corner of her mouth twitched upwards involuntarily. There was a part of her that agreed with the woman and was relieved to hear the thought spoken aloud. There was another part, however, that was suddenly very angry.

The woman's fingers ran over the cup. "To depend on *fate*. In a place like this. A quiet place like this." She took a sip. "I'll tell you one thing I've learned. Fate does not exist. People look for signs of fate because they have no direction. They string together a bunch of coincidences and call it fate. Fate is just an excuse for people to take what they're given without questioning it. It's an excuse to deny yourself of something that is just beyond your reach. *Decision*. That is what's real. Decision and chaos." She stood up and carried her cup over to the sink, running the delicately painted porcelain under a stream of hot water. She was quiet for a long time, but Archer could see that she was thinking and remained quiet too. When she was drying the saucer Camilla looked up. "You don't owe me enough to do what I'm asking you to do, but I'll ask you anyway. Promise me this. That if you want to get out of here, you won't sit around waiting for fate to save you. Because you can't be saved by an illusion." There was a knock at the door and Archer and Camilla both turned. Camilla hobbled over to the door and opened it. Archer's mother stepped inside and walked over to Archer before Camilla could even introduce herself and encircled Archer in a huge hug. Archer sank into the bulk of her mother's winter jacket and breathed in the smell of home.

The next day Archer woke up much later than usual. Brett had heard what had happened and had called her mother to tell her to let Archer sleep, that he would be in town for a while and would watch the store and that, yes, of

course, he would be glad to come over to dinner to catch up with Archer and her family. When Archer stumbled downstairs she read the note from her mother, telling her to eat something and that she and her father would be home early. Archer thumbed through the mail that her father had brought in that morning. In it was a letter addressed to her. It didn't have a stamp on it. Her name was written in a scrawling but graceful hand. Archer traced her name with her fingers and then ripped open the envelope. There was a note written in the same handwriting: *When I broke my ankle this became worthless, so I've transferred it to your name. It's up to you to decide. Please don't take as fate. – Camilla.* Archer looked further into the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. It was confusing at first. Then Archer's eyes began to pull apart the words. A ticket to Spain, for a plane that would leave tomorrow.