

01 The Trip

“CAN WE STOP SOON? I need to use the bathroom,” I asked, looking up from my paused music playlist at the trees flashing by the window.

“Sure. I’ll stop at the next comfort station,” my dad said. “Should be in about ten minutes.”

“Thanks.”

It would have been handy, on a road trip, to have been born cis-male so that I could have pissed almost anywhere. Granted, you had to have the right attitude

to stand and let it go at the side of the road.

We were on our way to Liverpool, Nova Scotia. My mom and dad and me. My older sister got to stay home.

The comfort station was crowded, with two ladies waiting outside the women's washroom, looking impatient and annoyed. I hitched up my baggy, low-rider, cargo pants as I passed them, and opened the door to the men's. It was empty except for a strong stench of urine, which I happily put up with in the interest of being able to piss right away and use a washroom that aligned with my gender.

While I sat for a piss — again, an inconvenience of my situation — I stared at my beat-up black and white sneakers, and wondered if I would still be functional by the time we made it to Liverpool. Going on seven hours stuck in a car with only my parents as companions was getting a little old, and there was still another hour until the hotel, and another eight hours to get through tomorrow.

One of the ladies was still waiting outside the

women's washroom when I left the men's. She gave me a less-than-friendly look, so I gave her a big fat smile and snapped my gum. *Don't try to police my bathroom choices, lady. You won't like what you get.* Besides, there was no way she could tell I hadn't been born with a penis unless she asked to look in my pants. At which point I'd report her to the owner of the gas station.

She didn't say anything, just turned back to the door of the women's toilet. I sauntered back to the car and got in.

"I guess I shouldn't have drunk that entire bottle of Coke," I said.

"I warned you," my mom said, but she smiled. "Road trip snacks. I get it. But you've got to think of the possible results."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Hey, Dominic," my dad said, "You know, we could go whale watching if you want?"

Huh. "Yeah? That would be cool."

"Once we get to town, I'll look up some places." He turned to my mom. "Is that something you'd do,

Doreen?”

“Sure. As long as there’s a bathroom on the boat,” she said.

The rest of the drive passed uneventfully. I stopped drinking pop and sipped from my water bottle, with fewer potty stops the happy result.

★★★

The tiny little town of Liverpool — Port of the Privateers — was a minuscule but picturesque town on the southern coast of Nova Scotia. Beautiful and peaceful, sure. But at sixteen and only six weeks away from my seventeenth birthday, I was more interested in hanging out with my friends than being a tourist. Unfortunately, all my friends were back home in Ottawa.

I flipped the page of my sketchbook and did some shading on something I’d been working on for over a week now. It was a side profile of my friend, Bashar. I couldn’t seem to get his hair just right. He wore it in a retro style and for some reason, every time I tried to draw him, he ended up looking like Elvis. I looked

harder at the photo that I was using as a guide, to see what I was missing.

I should have been happy that the long drive to get here was over. Maybe I was, but not that thrilled to have made it to our destination. We were going to be here all summer, and I didn't know how I was going to handle it.

My mom said my grandmother had loved growing up in this little town with Summerside Beach fifteen minutes away by car, but by the time she had hit her teen years, she had been desperate to leave. She didn't like that everyone had known everyone else's business. She'd wanted to go to university in Halifax, but her father, my great-grandfather, hadn't supported that because she was his daughter and not his son. So, she'd gone to Mount Allison instead, to get a secretarial diploma. Then she found a job at the hospital in Halifax, which was where she'd met my grandfather, who'd come all the way from England for a job as a doctor at the same hospital. After they got married, they had a home in Halifax, and later moved to Ottawa.

They were gone now, buried in a pretty cemetery between Ottawa and Manotick. I'd bet that cemetery was busier right now than this tiny little town.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the slanted ceiling of the room at the back of the upstairs. It wasn't very big, but at least it was mine. The window looked out over the backyard, but all I could see were trees and bushes. My parents had the main bedroom, of course. My older sister had decided to stay in Ottawa with her best friend, mostly because she had a full-time job during the months she had off from her studies at Carleton University, but also because she'd known that spending an entire summer here would be torture.

In two weeks, we were going to leave this rental and check into a small cottage that overlooked Summerside Beach. It was part of the Sand Dunes Beach Resort and Restaurant. My mom had wanted to rent it for all of July and August but they didn't have any available cottages for the first two weeks of July, so we had reserved this place instead. I wasn't sure which was worse, honestly. Maybe it was motivation

to make sure I had a job next summer, so I could stay in Ottawa. Travelling with my parents was not as much fun as it used to be when I was younger.

“Dominic? We’re going to the pizza place on Main Street for supper in fifteen minutes, okay?” my mom shouted from downstairs.

Ugh. Well, *pizza*. That was a positive. Because I was starving.

“Yeah. I’ll be down in a minute.”

I dug a pair of Bermuda shorts out of my suitcase and put them on, then grabbed one of my many black short-sleeved shirts and a red plaid button-down in case I got chills from the air conditioning. I may not have been the most fashionable person but I looked okay, and at least my clothes were clean.

I went into the tiny bathroom with my tube of styling gel and carded some into my light-brown shagged hair, making it look artfully messed up. Or, at least, I hoped that was the effect it had. My cowlick swooped dramatically in the front. I’d stopped trying to fight it because I wanted to put as little effort into

my appearance as possible. The pale skin of my face was at least a little rosy over my cheekbones, and its spattering of freckles and sharp blue eyes, was okay, I guessed. My mouth was maybe a little bit big for my face, but my mom said my smile could charm the pants off people so I guess I didn't mind. It had gotten me out of trouble more than once.

"Is the pizza parlour air-conditioned?" I asked as I thumped down the creaky wooden stairs in my combat boots, holding the banister because the narrow staircase seemed a bit iffy.

"Oh, I don't know," my mom said. "Mark, do you know?"

My dad shook his head. "Do you want me to call?"

Both of the places we'd rented had air conditioning, because my mom had MS and the heat drained her energy and made her mild symptoms worse. She was on a long-term drug routine, so she wasn't disabled or anything, but she got tired easily and had to be careful not to do too much.

“No, no. It’s fine,” Mom said. “If it’s really hot inside we can bring the pizza back here.”

We walked along the sidewalk on Main Street. The town was pretty, there was no arguing that. Cute stores and gift shops lined the sidewalk. The main grocery store and a larger commercial area occupied space across the Mersey River. We’d stopped there to load up with supplies before driving into town.

The door of the pizza parlour jingled when we went inside, but nobody looked up. We grabbed a table near the window and the red-haired server came along without much delay.

“Hello! How are you folks?” she said.

“Good, thanks,” my Mom said.

I nodded.

“Are you visiting Liverpool?” the server asked.

“Yes. We’re staying at an Airbnb down the street,” my dad said. “But Doreen’s mom grew up here.”

The server smiled at my mom. “Oh, you don’t say?”

“Yes, she lived on Summer Street.”

“How nice,” she said in a cheerful voice, her Maritime twang obvious to my ears. She placed some menus on the table and told us she’d be back soon for drink orders.

“Dominic, do you think you could try to look a little more pleasant?” my mom said in a whisper.

“What?” I said.

My dad rolled his eyes. “Leave her alone, Doreen.”

I bristled and opened my mouth to correct him for the hundredth time.

“Sorry,” he said, holding up his hands. “Leave *him* alone. Look we’re all tired and hungry.”

“I’m sorry we dragged you away from your friends, Dominic. Isn’t this a pretty town, though?”

“It’s . . . nice. Sure.”

“It’s not Ottawa,” my dad said. “Or Toronto. But it has its charm.”

My mom watched me. She reached out for my hand. I didn’t really want to respond, but I didn’t want to ignore the gesture either. I gave it to her.

She squeezed my fingers. “You’re going to have

fun, Dominic. I promise.”

“Sure,” I said, not really convinced. But my mom seemed so invested in me enjoying myself, I decided to squash my disappointment, at least for one evening, and try to be cheerful. I’d pretended to be happy for years, I supposed I could pretend again for one more summer. I didn’t want to fake it, but I could.

It wasn’t as hard once our food and drinks arrived. The pizza was hot with tons of cheese and pepperoni, and the cola was cold and refreshing, the caffeine giving me the lift I needed. My dad was right. It had been a long, tiring drive and we were all a bit grumpy. The food definitely helped. Afterward, I felt almost human again.

I watched the other people in the restaurant. They were mostly families, but there were three girls around my age sitting at another table who seemed all right. One of them kept glancing my way and I smiled at her. She ducked her head down and said something to one of the others. They erupted into giggles and I didn’t know if they were making fun of me or just being silly.

Then I heard one of them say, “So many tourists.” Another girl said, “. . . don’t know why they come here.” And someone else said, “Probably from Toronto.”

I didn’t mind being mistaken for someone from Toronto, honestly, but I got the impression they weren’t exactly open to meeting new people. No-one made eye contact with me again and I ignored them after a while.

“Let’s go to Fort Point Park,” my mom suggested when she paid the bill. “I’m too tired to go out to the beach today, but we can see the ocean there.”

Mom wanted to walk, but my dad persuaded her to let him drive us. It was only a twenty-minute walk, but the weather was hot and humid, and we didn’t want her to overdo it.

We drove along the other end of Main Street. It was lined with historic houses and cottages, their lawns green and lush. At the end, it curved to the right and ended at Fort Point Park, a small stretch of grass and trees, with a couple of picnic tables, a stone monument, and two stationary cannons. A red and

white, square-based lighthouse stood at the tip of the park where it looked out to the open sea at the mouth of the river.

We headed for the small parking lot beside the lighthouse.

The salt smell of the Atlantic Ocean hit me squarely in the face when I got out of the car.

“That’s the sea all right,” my dad joked.

The Atlantic Ocean opened up before us, vast and calm. We made our way along the concrete sidewalk that edged the greenspace and allowed visitors a clear view. On the other side of that huge stretch of water was England, which boggled my mind.

My mom lifted her chin to sniff the salt air, a blissful look on her face.

“When I was young, we’d come every summer. I loved it here. I’d climb on the cannons and go into the lighthouse. We’d sit here on the ledge with our legs hanging down, watching the horizon. It’s so peaceful.”

My dad put his arms around her waist and leaned in to whisper something in her ear. She giggled.

I decided to give them a moment to themselves, and walked a little further along the path, tying the sleeves of my plaid shirt around my waist.

I thought about my friends back home and what they might be doing tonight. I only noticed there was a person on the bench ahead when I was almost upon them. At first glance, I thought it was a girl. But as I got closer, even though this person was wearing a gauzy flowered skirt and white canvas runners, I couldn't be sure and I didn't want to assume anything.

I stopped near where they were sitting and crossed my arms over the viewing rail, pretending to look out to sea, when all I was doing was biding my time until I felt comfortable gazing at the stranger again. When I did, they were looking in a slightly different direction, giving me a view of their profile. A white cordless earbud nestled in the dusky shell of their ear, a new model iPhone in their hand, and a benign smile on their face.

As I watched, they turned towards me.

Soft brown eyes met mine, and I gazed back,

unblinking. They held me for a moment, then looked down at their phone and crossed one leg over the other in a casual but deliberate way. They looked at me again.

Their skin was the colour of burnished bronze, and their hair was a darker brown than their eyes, and hung almost to their shoulders in soft relaxed curls. A silver stud in their nostril gleamed in the sunshine.

The corners of their mouth tipped down as I continued to stare, and I realized my intense attention might be unwanted. It was hard to look away.

I turned back to the view, seeing nothing but my memory of how they looked, and those brown eyes gazing into mine and blinking slowly, like a cat. I watched the horizon, wondering how long I should wait before I chanced another glance. And took too long.

When I turned, they were gone from the bench and walking slowly away from me down the path. I watched their graceful and leisurely movements, and was surprised when they turned back and smiled at me.

My hand lifted of its own accord and gave a brief wave as if we already knew each other. They didn't return the gesture, but went on their way along the sidewalk with a feline grace.

I was breathless and dazed, as if I'd seen a ghost. But that had been a flesh and blood person, and suddenly, Liverpool, Nova Scotia, didn't seem so boring.