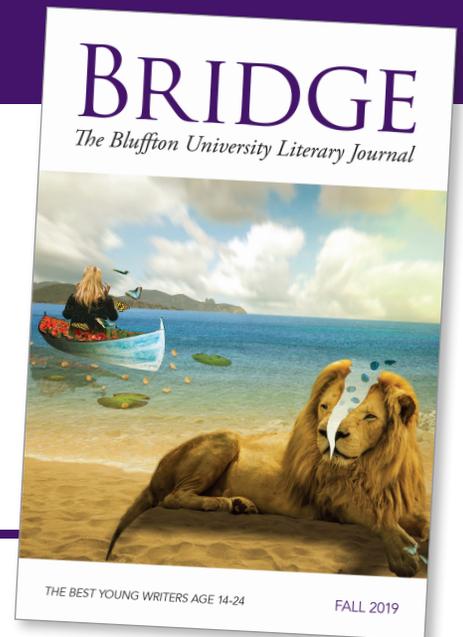


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NICOTINE SKY

Marissa Peloso

“She passed away around five-thirty this evening.”

The social worker’s words are light and soft against Jack’s ear, the phone a heavy rock upon his shoulder. She continues without pause. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this. Please take a minute if you need.”

Jack wants to tell the social worker that he hasn’t spoken to Kelly in years. And, that in his lifetime, he’s been in the same room as Kelly only twice: once at a party his senior year of college, then six years ago in a lawyer’s office. That was when he signed the papers. After that, it was just a matter of writing her name on a check every month, licking the stamp, and putting the envelope in the mailbox. He didn’t know Kelly — not really.

“I’m fine,” he says. “Is this about George?”

“Yes, I’m calling about the boy,” the woman says, all business. He isn’t upset, so she doesn’t need to tiptoe. “Our records indicate he’s your son. Kelly Anderson left no will, and there’s no immediate family other than yourself.”

He sucks in a breath of air like it’s smoke. “Is he hurt?”

“No, no. Well — he was in the backseat when it happened. Saw the whole thing.

But no, he’s not injured.”

Jack stares at the ceiling. It’s popcorn paint, mottled like a disease. “So he’s got nowhere to go?”

“No, sir. That’s why I’ve called you. I understand you haven’t been actively involved in the child’s life —”

“George’s,” Jack interrupts. He doesn’t know why it makes him angry. “George’s life.”

“Yes, of course,” the social worker corrects. “Normally the standard procedure is to keep George in our care while we conduct an inspection of your living situation. However, with an overload of casework — you understand.”

Jack pictures the foster home they’d put George in, imagining the nasty caretakers from Annie. The idea makes him nauseous. “When can you bring him here?”

The next afternoon, George is on his doorstep. He holds a small duffel bag, the little pale blue ones they make for kids. There’s a plastic fire truck in one hand, the red paint faded pink.

“Hi there,” Jack says. The social worker looms above the boy, hands clamped around her clipboard, a hawk with navy-painted talons. “It’s — it’s nice to meet



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you.”

George is looking at the concrete steps, curly blonde hair covering his face from view. Already, Jack has nothing more to say.

“Do you remember who I said you’re meeting today?” The social worker is leaning down, face-level with George, like he cannot understand her unless she’s two inches from his ear. “This is your dad.”

The word sounds like a curse to Jack, and he almost flinches. George doesn’t react and just watches his shoes. Dirt-streaked sneakers, the sole cracked. One sock is blue and the other is plaid.

When no one speaks, the social worker straightens. “Why don’t we go inside? I hear there’s a nice TV.”

The TV has rabbit-ears and a screen the size of an Easy-Bake Oven. Jack leads both George and the social worker inside, to an apartment cleaned with bleach-water and an old rag. The living room and kitchen are molded into one, with a dumpy couch and rusted stove only half a foot apart. The social worker eyes the refrigerator as though afraid a rat is going to scuttle out into the open.

It’s quiet, so Jack clears his throat. “That’s a cool fire truck,” he tells the boy, pointing.

George looks down at the toy, like he’s forgotten it’s in his hand. “A wheel is broken.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get hot glue to fix it.” Jack didn’t even know if that would work. He’d never played with toy fire trucks growing up. George wasn’t looking at the TV, just down at his shoes again. In here, the mismatched socks don’t seem so out of place.

“How about you show us his room?” the social worker asks, but it really isn’t a question.

The bedroom is more like a closet. Jack put a twin-sized mattress from an old

friend’s apartment down on two wooden pallets, then covered it with a blue blanket. An overturned crate serves as a nightstand; Jack put his own bedroom lamp there, in case George was afraid of the dark. There’s only one window, but it overlooks the treetops.

The social worker is scribbling onto her clipboard. George steps up to the window, peering out, his free hand pressed against the smudged glass.

“Wait ‘til you see it at sunset,” Jack tells him, over the sounds of pen against board. Stepping around the social worker, Jack leans over George and points outside, but he’s moved too quickly and George visibly shrinks back. It makes Jack think of the neighbor’s rescue dog, years ago when he was little, who would scamper away — shaking and cowering in the corner — if you rolled up a newspaper.

“Sorry,” Jack says hastily, and for some reason, there’s a lump forming in his throat. George is still looking out the window, shoulders hunched up to his ears. Behind them, the social worker is clicking at her phone, balancing it against the clipboard, oblivious. Jack keeps his voice quiet and points again, slowly this time and not too close. “The trees will turn red. It’s really cool. We’ll come back later and see.”

They leave George in the bedroom and step into the kitchen-living room. The social worker flips through her notes, acrylic nails clicking across paper, not looking up when she speaks. “Well, I have to tell you, the space is a bit small. But as long as you keep it clean, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Jack says nothing. She ticks off boxes in her notes, one by one, with flourish. “Keep toxic substances in hard to reach places. Trim the blinds’ strings to six inches above the windowsill. Keep electrical cords hidden. Always keep an

ear out when he’s bathing. Do you know the heimlich maneuver? CPR?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t, but he imagines it can’t be too hard to figure out.

The social worker flips the page and eyes Jack, just for a second, then looks back at the clipboard. “Any substance abuse issues we should be aware of?”

“No.”

“Do you drink alcohol? Smoke tobacco?”

He grinds his teeth. “Not anymore, no.”

The social worker turns the clipboard toward him, holding out the pen so he can sign the papers. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Jack takes the clipboard. He speaks when he knows he shouldn’t, and his words come out hot. “You asked Kelly all those questions? When George was born and she took him home from the hospital?”

The blue talons are frozen mid-air, and the pinched face is about to close in on itself. “I don’t understand what you mean,” she says. “These are required questions for any parent of a child in our system—”

“Yeah, okay, I get it.” As he signs, the edges of the white paper are burning black. “I’ll see you in five days.”

When the social worker leaves, Jack returns to the closet-bedroom. George is sitting on the mattress, heels propped against the wood pallet, knees curled to his chest. He stares out the window, eyes blank as a sheet of paper. The fire truck lies next to him on the blanket. Now Jack can see the broken wheel, slanted up toward the ceiling like a crooked limb.

“What do you want for dinner?” he asks, hands shoved in his pockets. “Soup, mac and cheese, peanut butter and jelly, um—”

“I don’t know,” George says.

They eat mac and cheese, the boxed

kind with powdered, bright orange flavoring. There is no dining table so they sit on the couch, and Jack puts on a kids TV channel. George holds the bowl of pasta with both hands, carefully, so he doesn't drop it. He takes small sips of juice from the glass, slowly, so he doesn't spill.

"It's okay if you get the couch dirty," Jack tells him. His tongue feels like sandpaper, and it's hard to get the words out. "It's old anyway. I don't mind."

After dinner, Jack shows him the red treetops outside. George presses his nose flat against the window and watches the trees catch fire in the dying sunlight. "Cool, right?" Jack says, but George doesn't respond. His eyes are wide, glowing from the reds and oranges and yellows, like autumn is swallowing summer within minutes and he has never seen the seasons change before.

The sleeve of George's yellow rain jacket has slipped down, and Jack sees four pink, round scars on the skin of the boy's wrist. Each scar is the size of a dime. George has spread his fingers across the windowpane, the hands of a giant looming above burning smudges of trees. Jack looks at the warped skin and tries to swallow, but there's nothing there.

Once the red has muted itself to grey, Jack helps George unpack. There are only two t-shirts, one pair of jeans, one sweatshirt, and two pairs of underwear. They refold the clothes and tuck them inside the nightstand crate. "You don't have another pair of socks?" Jack asks.

George shakes his head. He's holding the fire truck again.

"Okay. Well I have extra, and you can borrow mine."

When Jack runs the bath, he tries to get the water just right. He takes his showers cold, to save on gas, but now he wants it to steam. George places the fire truck down just outside the bathroom door, like

it's not allowed inside.

"You can bring it in, if you want," Jack says. George looks at him, eyes wide, the faucet bubbling between them. It was like he suggested eating cake for breakfast. "Or not, it's okay. You don't have to."

Jack stays to help George get in the tub. When he holds George's arms, skinny with knobby elbows, he sees more dime-sized scars on his back. Two on the shoulder blade, one halfway down the spine. There's acid at the base of Jack's throat. His hand shakes when he twists off the faucet. "I'll be right outside if you need me," he tells George, the words burning his tongue.

He leaves the bathroom door cracked and returns to the living room. He sits on the couch and grinds the heels of his hands into his eyes, until pink dots and spinning purple lines brighten against the black. He can see Kelly, too, behind his eyelids — twenty and blonde, wearing a green UVM crewneck. A cigarette between her lips.

Jack remembers now. She offered him a line of coke that night, and when he said no she offered to show him her dorm room. Drunk and stupid. He didn't know she'd gotten pregnant until a year later, when the lawyer called. Kelly wanted child support checks. But no one would let him see George, even when Jack came to sign the papers. The ratty Beatles concert t-shirt Kelly wore, with a ketchup stain on George Harrison's forehead, was the only explanation he got for the boy's name. Instead of looking him in the eye, Kelly hid behind a screen of smoke.

Later, when Jack tucks George into bed, he asks if George wants the light on.

George is quiet for a moment, but he says no, thank you.

"Are you sure?" Jack watches him. "I don't mind."

"Well," George says. "Okay, please."

Jack pauses at the door, looking back inside before he shuts it. George's face is half-shadow and half-red, the lamp a hazy orange glow on the nightstand. The fire truck leans against the wooden crate, inches from George's nose because he's curled onto his side, one arm tucked under the flat pillow. In the lamplight, the fire truck's faded paint glows a brilliant red. The crooked wheel is cast in shadow, and the toy appears unbroken, new.

"We'll glue the wheel tomorrow," Jack says, hand on the doorknob, chest squeezing tight on his lungs. "Okay, bud?"

"Okay," George says.

Jack waits an hour before calling the social worker. He sits on the back porch, knees to his chest in the darkness, the sound of crickets and cicadas thrumming the air. The phone is cradled between his shoulder and ear.

"Is something wrong?" The social worker asks, when Jack tells her who he is. "Did something happen with George?"

He keeps his eyes shut, rocking back and forth on the porch steps like he's about to be sick. "What caused the accident?"

"Sir, my office hours start tomorrow morning at eight o'clock if you have —"

"You don't understand," Jack says. "I need to know why she crashed the car. Was it her fault?"

The phone is quiet. His ears fill with the hum of cicadas, until his skull feels ready to split between his brows. The social worker's voice is slow, like her words are pushing through a layer of syrup. "I can only tell you what we know from the news report. The car accident did involve a drunk driver."

He doesn't need to ask which driver it was. His lungs are on fire inside him, bursting with something like cigarette smoke that burns from the inside out. If he screams into the darkness, he thinks his

mouth will taste of blood.

“She shouldn’t have been a mom,” Jack says. His voice is pinched, escaping lips that aren’t his own and speaking to someone who isn’t there. “She shouldn’t have been a mom.”

But what did Jack know about being a dad?

Later, when his lungs are hollow and his arms feel ready to loosen from their sockets, Jack stands outside George’s bedroom door. He wants to look inside, to see if he’s sleeping. Maybe he wants to see the dime-sized scars on his arm again, just to make himself swallow more guilt. But Jack doesn’t want to wake him, and if he swallows more guilt, he might drown.

Instead, he lies down outside the bedroom door. Jack curls into himself, shoulder digging into the hardwood flooring. He doesn’t know how to be a dad. But this is okay, he thinks. Jack knows how to try.

He closes his eyes and dreams of a fire truck with a broken wheel. He dreams of blonde hair and lipstick-stained teeth, a little boy folding in on himself, a skin ashtray. Then he dreams of autumn being set on fire, flaming red treetops exhaling cigarette smoke. A nicotine sky.