

Sunday Afternoon

I can feel the muscles along my side stretching as I will my hand further and further, fingertips just a few centimetres away the underside of the branch. A sharp crack punctuates the murmur of conversation coming from below me, and I throw myself forward, desperately grabbing at the air. My fingernails scrabble against the rough bark and I fall. I hit the ground with a solid thud, curling up as tightly as I can against the pain.

I hear the initial laughter grow uncertain and stop. Someone's calling my name. I groan, and open my eyes, blinking at the bright sunlight. A ring of concerned faces looks down on me, silhouetted against the December sky.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Dude, I told you not to climb that tree, it's all rotted out. You alright? How many fingers am I holding up?"

I laugh "Depends if you count thumbs."

Relieved laughter from the group as many hands help me up, brushing the leaves and dirt off my clothes.

"I swear to God, you are better than anyone I've ever met at injuring yourself", comments Reilly, pulling a stick out of my hair.

"Oh ye gods, has she broken herself again? 'Cause that's really going to kill the rest of the day", says Richmond, ambling over from where Natalie is still inspecting the broken branch. Tara begins berating him before I can even open my mouth to reply.

"You're so *mean*, Rich! What if she'd really hurt herself?"

"Then I would... laugh!" he cries, quickly dodging the stick I throw at him.

Alice shoves him gently, then turns back to me.

"You sure you're ok? I've got plasters and stuff if you want."

"Nah, I'm fine. Thanks though, O Eternally Prepared One", I grin.

Natalie rejoins the circle, brushing leaf grime off her sleeves.

“So what are we doing now, guys?”

“Well personally, I am *quite* hungry. Anyone else want to go for food?” asks Rich.

“Sure, I’m keen.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

We cut through the bushes to the track, then wander along in a ragged bunch. I walk in the middle, letting the conversation wash over me.

“You know what I’d really like right now? Beef eggs. Someone fetch me a huge genetic laboratory.”

“I’d rather have a frozen coke.”

“What? You’re crazy! Just think, sweet, juicy beef eggs...”

“But frozen coke’s really good! It’s all sweet and frozey and mmm.”

“I bet it’s pretty damn *tempting*, huh Tara?”

“Hey, no fair! That’s my word!”

We stop by the peacock fountain, which is working in between maintenance jobs.

“So, where are we going for lunch?” I ask.

“Ooh ooh ooh, I know!” cries Natalie.

“Natalie votes for Subway”, laughs Richmond.

“Hey, I didn’t even say it!” she exclaimed indignantly.

“But we all know you were thinking it”, I reply. “Admit it...”

“Well, maybe. Can we go to Subway? Please?”

“Sure”, says Reilly, amid nods from the rest of the group.

We walk down the middle of Worcester Boulevard, and run across the road without waiting for the little man to turn green. We wait on the other side of the road for Tara to catch up and tell us off, but instead of yelling, she points at the pole sculpture outside the Art Gallery.

“What is that actually supposed to be?” she asks.

“It’s art”, replies Alice, waving a hand aimlessly.

“I’m sure it’s probably supposed to have some deep meaning”, says Robert.

“Aliens!” I declare. “There’s absolutely no other explanation!”

“That doesn’t even make sense!” replies Tara.

“Sure it does, you see, long ago...”

Natalie cuts me off.

“Can we go get food please? I’m getting really hungry.”

“Fine”, I acquiesce. “But don’t blame me when you get kidnapped by aliens tonight, furious because you wouldn’t let their story be told...”

We walk in a line the rest of the way, taking up more space on the street than we probably should, and not caring at all. When we get to the shop, it’s crammed full, not a single spare seat.

“You still want to eat here?” Richmond asks Natalie.

“Of course! It’s *Subway*!” she replies, already in line.

Ten minutes later, we’re standing outside, six of the seven of us holding paper-wrapped rolls.

“Aren’t you going to get anything?” asks Tara, looking curiously at Alice.

Alice opens her mouth to speak, but Richmond cuts across her.

“Of course not, she’s on the Coffee Diet.”

“Well”, says Robert, “we’d better go somewhere that has coffee.”

“Arts Centre?” I suggest.

No-one objects, so we start walking back the way we came. This time, conversation is limited, and the few words exchanged are muffled by mouthfuls of salad and processed cheese. We go through the market, glancing at the trinkets in the shops, but there isn't anything worth stopping for. We walk through the food section somewhat more slowly, as people duck off to buy more food, rejoining the group with steaming, exotic smelling plates.

We go through the narrow alley out the back of the Court Theatre, papered with posters for the current show, *The Great Gatsby*. Coming out into the sun at the other end, we sit on the raised lawn, watching two small children play in the wide shallow pond. They giggle and squeal, trying to stomp on the reflection of the wire house suspended above the quad. No-one speaks. Here, on the warm grass, watching the sun turn water droplets into diamonds, listening to each other breathing, there's nothing that needs to be said.