



Cecilia and Richard

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After, when all the casseroles are gone, the man and the girl who is his daughter descend the two flights of stairs and cross the street to Mama Panda's. The waitress, who knows them, but does not know them know them, seats them in their regular place. The daughter's eight-year-old legs swing like eight-year-old legs. The father does not have the energy for metaphor, to say that the girl's legs are something other than what they are. The sun shines like the sun that it is. The stairs go down like stairs going down. And on days the father and the daughter make it to the bottom, when they turn around to go home, the stairs go up exactly like stairs going up. Some days, the father can conjure the language to make the stairs something he does not hate. He does this for the daughter, whom he lately cannot bear but has never hated.

The father orders combo 3. "Can you do the fried rice without the peas?" he asks the waitress.

"We can remove the peas, sir, but then we will also need to remove the rice." They have played this game before. The waitress winks at the girl.

"Ah, a dilemma," the father says. "In that case, maybe just leave them in."

The father and the daughter eat sweet and sour pork, beef chow mein, and fried rice with the peas in. It is hot for September, and their legs, in shorts, stick to the plastic chairs. The father knows how to make his legs fart by unsticking them. He waits for the right moment. Maybe he will always be waiting. When they are full, they continue eating, but still there are leftovers. The waitress packs these up.

“Come again soon,” she says, handing the father a Styrofoam box. “Rumour is, they’re closing.”

“How soon?” the father asks.

“Two weeks? A month? Hard to say, you know?”

The father says he knows.

They go home. The Styrofoam box makes one lone iceberg in the fridge.

“Atlantic or Pacific?” the father asks. His daughter, whom he loves, loves oceans.

“Arctic.” She is not crying until she is.

The father puts the mustard and ketchup bottles on their sides. “See?” he says. “Ships.”

On Monday, the father goes back to work and the daughter, to school. The father mixes paint at a paint store. Today, he makes many greys. He makes Lake Ice and Paris Sidewalk, and Rain Slicker. He thinks, rain slickers should be yellow. He does not know what the daughter does at school or whether he should ask her. He thinks about what he will say while adding black to white to make New Room.

After work, the father walks his daughter home from school. They tug the collapsed lawn chairs out from under the bed in the father’s room, one blue and green weave, the other yellow and orange. On the way down to the street, the aluminum frames of the chairs chime against the concrete steps when the father and daughter don’t lift them high enough. At the bottom, they unfold the chairs on the sidewalk facing Mama Panda’s.

“Tell me all the big learning,” the father says.

The daughter says there was no big learning today.

“Tell me the medium learning then.”

“The medium learning was blends.”

Once, the father forgot to look at the tag when he washed the mother’s olive-green sweater. It was cotton polyester blend, but more cotton. The sweater shrunk, but not enough. He couldn’t wash it hot enough or dry it long enough. The sweater is still in the closet, just big enough to be empty.

Blends, the daughter explains, is when two letters come together to make a new sound. “Brain. Strain. Train. Dream. Cream. Stool. Blue. Street. Greet. Bread. Dread,” she says. “Like that.” She tells him they can come at the end too. “Milk. Melt. Cold. Hold. Hard. Card.”

“How about bald?”

“My father is bald,” she says.

The father says he walked right into that one, and the girl says, yes, he did. At five, the train rumbling into the tunnel below them makes the girl’s sidewalk chalk tremble.

The father raises his eyebrows in the direction of the girl’s stomach. “Why didn’t you tell me you were that hungry?”

“That wasn’t me,” the girl says. “That was you.”

The father says he is strong. Let him prove it, by taking both lawn chairs up the stairs.

“No,” she says. He can’t take the lawn chairs because they shouldn’t call them lawn chairs. They don’t even have a lawn.

“True.” The father lifts one leg off the sidewalk and rubs the inside of his calf. “What should we call them?”

“I’m calling mine Cecilia,” she says. “You can call yours whatever you want.”

“What about Richard? It even has two blends.”

“C-H is actually a digraph.”

The father tells Richard that he has a lot to learn.

The father cooks cereal for dinner. He puts Froot Loops in bowls and adds the milk and then slides the bowls onto the top rack in the oven.

“How long does cereal take to cook?” he asks.

“Stop it.” She doesn’t want him to be funny anymore. It’s too dark outside to be funny.

But he has to take the cereal out now that it’s in, so he does the thing and everything.

They eat the soggy cereal on the living room floor because it’s the room they’ve lived in the least.

The father leans against the ottoman. “Did you know she cooked cereal once?”

“Why?” Milk bubbles at the corners of the girl’s lips.

“Just to see what would happen.”

“What happened?”

“She said I should try it for myself and see.”

“No, she didn’t,” said the girl. “You’re making that up.”

There is not enough to clean up when they are finished. The father can’t understand how the things that are supposed to take time no longer do. When he reshelves the milk in the fridge, the girl takes it back out.

“Make it a lighthouse,” she says.

He blacks some windows on the carton with a Sharpie.

“Do some more.” She sits cross-legged on the table. He lets her sniff the marker. He sniffs it himself. It smells permanent. He draws more windows. Smaller and smaller so he can do even more.

Later, when the girl is asleep, the father cooks Froot Loops at 300 degrees Fahrenheit, how he’d bake a flan, or a cheesecake. After ten minutes, he whispers “bing.” He realizes that you can’t whisper bing, that it is actually a note and so it must be sung, not whispered, in order to be itself. It seems a great loss to the father that the bing is no longer a bing. Everything feels like a great loss to the father. The yellow-flecked linoleum feels like a great loss. The painted sign above the sink that says Eat Socks of Broccoli feels like a great loss. The cooked Froot Loops are warm and soggy. The kitchen smells like blue dye 2. Blue dye 2 is a great loss.

Every day, the girl pulls the chairs from beneath the bed.

“Cecilia and Richard are tired,” she says.

“How do you know?” the father asks.

“The way they are sleeping.”

“Cecilia and Richard love each other.”

“How do you know?”

“The way they are sleeping.”

“Cecilia and Richard are sick.”

“How do you know?”

“The way they are sleeping.”

“You’re right,” the father says every time. But it doesn’t matter how they are. Every day at four, they sit in front of Mama Panda’s.

One day, the daughter asks, “Why is Mama Panda’s closing?”

“It’s time for something new to go there.”

“Why are they really closing?”

“It’s a big word. It doesn’t even have a lot of blends.”

“Give it to me like an ice cube,” she says, which is code for give it to me even if it hurts. Or maybe, give it to me even if it’s hard to grasp. The father can’t remember. There had been so many codes. The father writes *gentrification* on the sidewalk in purple chalk.

The father had promised he would tell the girl all the real, all the way up.

“From herpes to the Holocaust,” his wife had said. “I mean it.”

“Is there something about the *h*’s?” he’d asked.

“I’m serious,” she said.

“Okay, I promise,” he told her.

“Hula-hoops,” she said.

“And Hiroshima,” he replied.

“Hot yoga.”

““Hanky Panky.””

““Hey Ya!””

“The song?”

“Yes, the song.”

“By Outkast? Or the Obadiah Parker cover?”

“The original,” she said. “The acoustic version is shit.”

“Here Comes the Sun.”

“Hakuna Matata.”

“Hotel California.”

“Hungry.”

“Are we moving on to countries now?” he asked.

“No. Hungry,” she said. “I’m hungry.”

He went to get her the Jell-O she wouldn’t eat. When he got back, she said, “I meant the country.”

The daughter dissects the word by separating it into parts with short green slashes.

“One blend. One suffix. The rest is the rest.” She looks up at him. Her leggings are coated in chalk dust. Her hair, greasy going into the yellow elastic, is a knotted nest coming out of it. “What does it mean?” she asks.

“It means whoever owns the building is making the rent too high so that Mama Panda’s will have to leave and some nicer restaurant will go there.”

The girl lines up some yellowing dogwood leaves in front of Cecilia.

“My turn,” the father says. “What have you got against the shower?”

The girl flips all the leaves upside down. “It’s been a real douche lately.” She stole that one from him.

“Hey, no poaching jokes.” He lines up his own leaves. “What have you *really* got against the shower?”

She turns her leaves perpendicular so they point west down Saint Francis Avenue. “I forget the order.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s shampoo, conditioner, and soap whenever you want,” he says.

“That’s different than what she said.”

He points his leaves east. One blows away.

“Shampoo, conditioner, soap whenever you want?” she asks.

“It works for me.”

“Well, now I’m *really* convinced.”

At five, the muffled groan of the train makes leaf spines vibrate up and down the block.

“You could have told me you were that hungry,” she says, beating him to it this time.

Before she folds up Cecilia, she asks, “What could be better than Mama Panda’s?”

“Papa Panda’s?” This he regrets, so he asks quickly, “Egg rolls?”

“Not if my egg rolls you first.”

They sit where they always sit, and everything feels the same different that it’s been since then.

At home, the father hands the take-out boxes to the daughter. “Please add these icebergs to the ocean.” He opens the bathroom door and parts the shower curtain. The plastic rings jostle along the bar loud enough for the daughter to hear. “Don’t be a douche, you hear me?” he says sternly to the empty tub.

The girl has always called the hallway carpet the moss. Be careful in the moss, there are mushrooms. Don't vacuum the moss, you'll kill the frogs. She hated getting her fingernails clipped so the father said, we'll clip them in the moss. The father said to the mother, you put out the picnic blanket, I'll get the tea. And later his wife said, get the wine. Get the bottle. I want you in the moss.

The daughter mined the moss these days, for fingernails. "Let's never vacuum the moss again," she said.

The father said this was fine with him.

Now, he sits in the moss. If he can't hear the girl crying through the water, maybe she can't hear him either.

One day, it is warmer than it could be, and Mama Panda's is busy. They are watching the people come out and saying what might be in their fortune cookies. A man comes out with a mustache.

"Today," the father says in his best fortune-teller voice, "you will offend someone with your facial hair."

"You will urinate this evening," the girl says.

"Ah, a true fortune teller."

When no one comes out of the restaurant, the girl turns to the father. "Do things ever come out of your mouth when you sneeze?"

The father says that once, it was a whole pretzel. The strangest thing: he wasn't even eating a pretzel when it happened.

"You're making that up," the girl says.

The father shrugs.

“For me it was an M&M,” the girl says.

“Did it hit anyone?”

“No, it didn’t hit anyone.”

“That’s too bad.”

A lady comes out of Mama Panda’s wearing a red hat.

“It’s difficult to say,” the father says, putting his fortune-teller voice back on. “But I am getting the feeling you will experience a case of hat hair later this evening.”

“Tonight, you will try not to cry.”

“About the hat hair?”

The girl gets up to do her hopscotch.

The next morning, the father writes “groceries” on a sticky note, then tries to think of what they need.

“You forgot the list,” his wife had said, the time he came back with the mayonnaise but without the artichoke hearts pressed in oil. “But it’s okay. The recipe says you can substitute husband hearts.”

While the daughter is at school, the father goes to the store to buy Kleenex and M&Ms and comes home without them. It isn’t because he forgot the list. It is because when he goes through the aisles—past Kleenex and M&Ms, butter, broccoli, and beans—he can’t think of how these things, these things specifically, will make a difference.

On a day with wind, they bring blankets, so Cecilia and Richard won't be cold. The girl has written a fairy tale. It's called "The Three Little Pigs," but near the end, all three pigs get eaten by the wolf.

"That's not what's supposed to happen," the father says.

"That's because it's a fractured fairy tale. It's not supposed to go how you expect."

"But what happens to the three little pigs?"

"Let me finish the story." She reads the last page. "In the end, the three little pigs build a new house inside the wolf. They have dance parties quite often to Bob Marley, so that the wolf will be reminded that they are all in there and doing just fine."

"They dance to Bob Marley?" the father asks.

"What?" says the girl. "You did."

At the parent-teacher conference, the daughter's teacher shows the father the excellent work. The girl has mastered blends. Her fractured fairy tale is original. The teacher closes the folder of excellent work.

"She hardly talks at school," the teacher says. "Is she still this closed at home?"

"She talks to Cecilia and Richard."

"Are those friends outside of school?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll just be patient then." Which, the father thinks, is what kind and impatient people say when they don't realize they are being impatient and are worried about being kind.

"She'll open up when she's ready," the teacher says.

He wants to say, “She was born open. If you hold a buttercup close under your chin, it turns you gold.” That’s what his wife would have said before the sweater shrunk.

The aunts come to do a spa. A spa is what girls do. They bring things in bottles and ask the daughter what colour she wants her toenails. The girl’s toenails have not been painted for months, but she does not want them painted now. The girl abruptly wakes Cecilia and hauls her down to the curb.

The father tells them sorry.

His older sister opens the blind in the kitchen. “Just half,” she says.

“We’ve been playing hide and sleep,” he says.

Still at the window, the sister asks, “Is she alright down there by herself?”

“She’s safe,” the father says.

The aunts pack the bottles into a pink tub, and the father thinks suddenly about all the bottles, a future of bottles that smell ways when you unseal the tops. The girl will probably say, “This one?” and he won’t know if it’s good. It will smell like oranges, like peppermint, like roses, like strong, like gentle, but he won’t know when it should be oranges or peppermint or roses, or when it should be strong and when it should be gentle.

He brings Richard down the stairs and sets up beside Cecilia and the girl.

“What colour is the day?” the father asks. It is a game that she likes when she likes it. She’ll say, the colour of the day is Apricot or the colour is Red Bicycle or it’s Monkey Bars. Today, she doesn’t like anything. The father forgot the chalk so they can’t even fill the sidewalk with blends. People are starting to go home. It is that time of year when no one wants to admit

that winter is coming. Everyone in sweaters instead of coats, but clutching them tighter as if that will make what is thin thicker. Soon, the father thinks, there could be snow.

“I want to go home,” the girl says.

The father doesn’t know how to make that colour.

At six, the father and the daughter get combo 3 to go, extra peas. There is a sign in the window that says: Soon We Close.

In the living room, they open the old atlas that still has Czechoslovakia in it and try to decide: what’s the shape of each country on her toes? Her left big toe has just enough polish to be Italy.

“And this one is Australia,” she says about the right. Her pinkies only have green specks. Desert island 1 and desert island 2.

“Soon, they will be underwater,” she says.

“In what ocean?”

“The Arctic.”

“I didn’t know there were desert islands in the Arctic.”

“There are about to be.”

“We may have to get rid of some icebergs, you know, to make room,” the father says.

“Maybe they’ll melt.”

When it happens, it happens fast. They stop serving food, and soon it’s only family going in and out. Within the week, there are machines making every kind of noise. When there is hardly anything left, the father pulls the daughter out of school so she doesn’t miss the hardly

anything that's left. The father asks the daughter, is she sure she wants to stay? She is busy colouring a picture of all of them here together, so they won't forget. She says yes. Cecilia and Richard have been here the whole time and they can't just leave now. People slouch and shuffle and hurry past going places in the world. The father wants to shout at them to stop, just stop. The good nurse is there with the pink-flowered pants, but she can't do anything anymore. He holds the girl's hand. He touches her hair which is so much like her hair he stops touching it. When it's over, and she's gone, they sit there until the last day becomes the first day.

The train comes. It comes many more times.

One of these times, the girl narrows her eyes at the green and blue chair and says, "Was that Richard?"

"I thought it was Cecilia."

"They're hungry."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, it's way past dinner time."

The Arctic Ocean is pretty empty. The girl says, "How about some coral?"

"Why not?" the father says.

"And driftwood?"

"Every ocean needs driftwood."

"And cockle shells?"

"To keep the coral company."

The father makes perogies and farmer sausage with sauerkraut. They eat their dinner in the moss. The father leaves two icebergs in the ocean. One for Cecilia. And one for Richard.

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