

Two Miles from Hilton

by Bill Glose

“This isn’t a toy store,” says the woman behind the counter of Pandora’s Box. Tall and elegant in a sleeveless silk shirt, she stands with one hand on her hip, the other at her neck as she fingers a string of pearls. She wears the bored, cheek-sucking expression of a model and refuses to open the display case for me. “These are quite expensive.”

There was a time when Angie and I would come here in our school uniforms and play with the crystal figurines. Mom’s pottery was in the gallery two doors down and sales associates knew she’d pay for anything we broke. But that was seven years ago, almost half my life. Now I’m wearing a frayed tee shirt and high-water jeans that are worn in the seat.

Setting my backpack on the countertop, I remove a wad of cash from a zippered pocket and hold it out to the salesperson. She rolls her eyes and huffs. “Which one?”

“There,” I say, tapping the glass, “the crystal tiger.” The price is half my savings, but if Angie shows up today I don’t care what it costs.

The salesperson wraps the tiger in folds of green tissue and puts it inside a box. She snips a strand of silver ribbon from a roll and wraps it around the box. I feel a surge of pride while she ties a neat bow and for a second I wonder if this is how Dad used to feel. Angie would beam when she opened the boxes and pulled out the figurines. Then Mom would bring her back down to Earth. “The bum can buy trinkets,” she’d say, “but can he make support payments? No.” Angie and I didn’t take sides. It’d always been the two of us against the world.

Outside, the HRT bus is half a block down at Warwick and Main, its blinkers on. I could probably catch it but I’d rather hang on to the fare. The bus’s air brake releases with a loud sigh

and the diesel engine roars, coughing up a black fog. It rattles into the distance, trundling toward my neighborhood in downtown Newport News.

Walking down the brick sidewalk, hands in my pockets, I admire a black Jaguar parked in front of Silverman Furs, its wax job gleaming in the afternoon light. My reflection hovers in the window as I take in the cream-colored interior. I'd like to crawl inside and settle into the plush leather, run my hand along the walnut paneling, but the door must be locked. Something twists in my guts and I feel like scratching a rock along the glossy door. But what if it isn't locked? I glance up and down the street but the only movement I see is from blue jays swooping between pear trees. My clammy fingers slip under the silver handle and my heartbeat is pounding when I yank. The door doesn't give and the horn blasts a staccato alarm.

I shoot away and turn at the nearest corner, slowing to a fast walk only after the bleating alarm shuts down. The houses on this side street are Tudor cottages with steep slate-shingled roofs and well-tended lawns. Angling out from half the homes are flags with pictures of jumping dolphins, lighthouses, and waterfront scenes. A light breeze ruffles the flags, sending leaves skittering into storm drains where they gather with clumps of pine needles and pollen. A police cruiser slowly wheels past. The uniformed driver smiles through the open window and touches his brow with a two-fingered salute. Where I live cops whiz by in pairs, never alone, never smiling.

The outstretched arms of birches, oaks, and crepe myrtles arch over the street. Sunlight twinkles through this thin canopy and dapples the sidewalk as I walk along. I'm mesmerized by the dancing light and have no idea how far I've walked. When I finally look up, I see the sign for River Road and a thrill races down my spine. I turn down the road and recognize specific trees, houses, the rise and fall of surrounding landscape. Time seems to be going in reverse, each step

bringing me further into my past. Another fifty yards and I reach the spot where thick roots have buckled the concrete. I skirt the cracks like I've done a hundred times before. My body is on autopilot, moving forward in a daze until the powder blue siding and white shutters of my old house comes into view. Then I halt and find it difficult to breathe.

A few things have changed—ivy creepers climbing the brick chimney, sculpted cypresses bracketing the doorway, and a privacy fence closing off the back yard. In the front yard, a tricycle lies on its side next to the tire swing. The summer Mom moved in with a longhaired sculptor from her gallery, Angie and I would scrunch together on the tire and Dad would push it. We'd swing beneath the giant oak's branch in the muggy evenings and Dad would tell us that everything would be all right, that Mom would come back. But he was wrong. Within a year, Angie and I were living with Mom and her new boyfriend. The divorce settlement went to remodel Leif's warehouse apartment. Once that was gone, he'd said, "It was fun, Babe, but kids aren't my thing."

The front door to my old house opens and a woman with long, blonde hair steps out. She carries a Red Flyer wagon down the steps and sets it on the front walk. A little boy slams the door and leaps down the steps. He jumps into the wagon and straightens the triangular paper hat on his head. The mother starts to tow him down the walk, but stops when she sees the tricycle.

"What have I told you about picking up?"

"Aw, mom."

She looks back and scoops her hair behind her ear. "Put it away right when we get back, okay?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay then."

“Avast!” he calls out. “Faster!”

She takes off with a couple of running steps and the kid giggles wildly. When they pass me on the sidewalk, the kid slashes a cardboard wrapping paper roll through the air at me. “I’m a pirate,” he says. They continue across the street and turn at the next corner, heading in the direction of the park.

Back at the house, I step around terra cotta pots on the front steps and make my way onto the porch. I drop into a swing dangling from two chains and kick my legs to get it rocking. The air is full of spring and I tilt my head back to breathe in the scents of a thousand blossoms. With my eyes closed, I can picture Mom sitting on the steps in a light sundress. Sober. She’s got her arm around Angie and they’re both smiling. Dad is there, too. The daydream lasts just a moment, then it squeezes into a hard stone and sinks inside me like a heavy weight.

I hop off the swing and startle a finch that was grubbing through the grass. It takes flight and I follow, heading east toward Warwick. From there, the two miles home is a series of low rolling hills. If I ride the bus and close my eyes for the trip downtown, then it feels like I’ve been transported to a different world. But taking it slowly, block by block, the changes are more gradual. Crossing Main Street, the brick sidewalk becomes cement. When I pass the Village Playhouse, the strip of hard ground beside me has no more trees, just ragged patches of crabgrass. Another block and the strip malls begin—takeout restaurants, hair and nail salons, and liquor stores with thick protective grilles on the windows.

Halfway home I see the Blue Star Diner’s silver siding flashing in the sun. Squinting I can just make out the familiar neon sign: B_U_STA_DIN_ . It’s been that way for years but Gina, one of the waitresses, says there’s no sense fixing the burned-out letters. *Customers know who we are, she says, and them who don’t, we don’t need anyhow.*

Angie and I used to come here to visit Mom during the lull between lunch and dinner crowds. This was back when Mom and Angie could sit down together without tearing each other apart. Once Angie hit ninth grade though, that all changed. If Mom was for something, Angie was against it; and if Angie liked something, Mom hated it.

One night, Angie came into my room late and sat on the corner of my bed. “Don’t know how much longer I can stick around here,” she said. “You wouldn’t really leave, would you?” I asked. “Don’t worry, squirt,” she said, “You can come with. Me and you against the world, right?”

Mom isn’t working today, so I go round the muddy potholes in the gravel parking lot and climb the crumbling concrete steps, slap the Christmas lights strung over the doorway, which hang year round. Inside, the diner reminds me of black-and-white reruns from the 50s. Fronting the counter are swivel seats on steel posts and along the front window are blue vinyl booths with shaky tabletops. At each booth is a miniature jukebox attached to the wall. I plop down in a booth and Gina waddles over in her gravy-stained smock, her henna-colored beehive bobbling as she walks.

“Well, if it ain’t my favorite little man,” she says, setting a red plastic basket in front of me. “I tell you what, you missed a right good piece of excitement here yesterday.” Her drawl is slow and deep, *I* coming out as *ah* and *here* as *hee-uh*.

I grab a biscuit and bite into it. The wax paper at the bottom of the basket is sopping, but somehow the biscuits are bland. I’d never mention it to Gina though. She loves giving me the free basket.

“These two Arabs come in here yesterday,” Gina says, “sits themselves down, pulls out maps, and starts talking they funny Arab talk. So I phone right away down to the police station.”

The cook laughs over the sizzle of whatever he's frying on the grill, which is just over the front counter. "Yeah, but," he says, "tell him what kind of terrorists they was." The words whistle through the gaps of missing teeth.

"George, I told ya once, I told ya thousand times, keep your 'Yeah, buts' to yourself."

"They was just a couple tourists planning they vacation," George says.

"Yeah, *but!*" says Gina, emphasizing *but* with a shake of her head, "How's I supposed to know that, huh?"

"They's just waitin' on they train." George laughs, shoulders hitching, then he readjusts his white paper hat and turns his attention back to the stove.

"Ya can't take no chances any more," says Gina. "They suitcases coulda been bombs. Ya just never know."

Gina tilts her head to the side, squinting as she eyes my book bag on the seat next to me. "Any homework today?"

I shake my head. She doesn't really want to know about my homework; she's just being motherly. It's nice that someone cares enough to ask though.

"Well, all right then," Gina says. She knocks the Formica and shuffles to another table.

When I leave the diner, I cross Warwick and climb the berm separating the rail yard from the street. This used to be the first place I'd go when Mom sent me searching for Angie. Finding her was easy; I simply walked along the rail cars and opened a door when I smelled pot. Angie would laugh and say, *Found me*. The joint would make its way round the circle, its red tip smoldering with each deep drag. If one of the guys offered me a toke, Angie would glare at him and smack the back of his head. She was always looking out for me.

Over the motionless railcars the sun is dipping low on the horizon. I squeeze my eyes shut and whisper my wish. “Find me, Angie.”

Shifting my backpack, I run down the berm and head for home. From this point on, it’s a slew of pawnshops, bars, and strip clubs competing with multiple churches on every block. The churches are housed in squat brick buildings and have names like *Deliverance Worship Center* and *Breakthrough Church of God of Prophecy*. I keep my head down and count the gum blobs pressed into the pavement.

When I reach the abandoned Shell station, I spot the name Mooky written in big block letters with a line scratched through it. I’ve seen graffiti like this before and know what it means: X-ed out. When we first moved to the East End, a boy named Reggie rode my school bus. He was a tough kid with a flat nose dominating his face. Zigzag cornrows were pleated tight to his skull and an ever-present #7 Michael Vick jersey drooped to his knees. He sprawled in the back seat, called me *white bread*, threw crumpled paper at my head. Then he started wearing a beeper and hung out on a corner. One day I saw his name on the side of a building, lined through. He didn’t ride the bus any more. I look away from the graffiti and carry on. What else is there to do?

Up ahead a handful of people are milling outside The Kitt Katt Lounge. Propped against the wall and smoking a cigarette is a doughy woman in knee-high boots, a bustier, and a sheer, lacy robe. She seems about my mother’s age. Two twentyish men are talking to her, animated and laughing. The one with a rainbow-colored knit hat calls out to me, “Hey, little man, got five bucks I can hold?”

I keep walking.

“C’mon man,” says his dreadlocked friend. “Five bucks. Two bucks, how about it?”

I shove my hands deeper in my pockets, eye the cigarette butts and fast food wrappers in the gutter, never stopping. At the corner of 75th, a haggard man in a trench coat holds a cardboard sign reading *Will Work for Food*. I cross the street before I reach him and turn down 77th, picking up the pace.

Our brick row house comes into view and I'm sure Angie will be there. When I reach for the front door, the hairs on my neck stand on end. But when I step inside, it's just my mother in the Barcalounger, chin on chest, lightly snoring. Jerry Springer is on TV, the volume muted. Mom is wearing a terry cloth robe and a ratty housedress. The Missing Child flyer that is usually posted with magnets on the fridge is resting in her lap. On the end table are bottles of wine and Zoloft.

Careful of the squeaky floorboards, I tiptoe around the sunken couch and enter Angie's room. Nothing has been moved since she disappeared. Her collection of crystal figurines remains the way she left it, displayed on a mirror atop her dresser. I take down the unicorn, the panda, the dragon, dust them off on my sleeve, and return each animal to its spot. Then I untie the bow on Angie's present, remove the crystal tiger, and set it next to the others. "Happy birthday."

I sneak past Mom and out the front, crossing the street to the grassy overlook where Angie and I used to watch the sun set. The grass here is riddled with wildflowers and I plop down in a patch of dandelions. Across the water at the shipyard, the hull of a newborn is sitting in the water, pipe fitters scrambling over its frame while welders shoot sparks into the sky. Two years ago, this was the last place I saw Angie. We were sitting together looking across the river. Her low rider jeans had slits cut down the legs and she was idly strumming the tattered fabric. "I'm suffocating here," she said. Beneath her eyes, the skin was dark and stippled. Her hair was mussed and she was constantly sniffing. "I might need to take a trip, kiddo. Know what I mean?"

I nodded.

“I’m a little short on cash though.”

I waited for her to tell me, as she had before, “You can come with.” But she just turned her gaze back to the river, rubbed her nose, and sniffed some more. I went inside and returned with the cigar box in which I’d saved my allowance. She hadn’t actually asked for it; she didn’t need to. I would have given her anything. It’s always been her and me against the world.

The sky is dusky gray now. To the north, around the curve of shore, I can see the lights from Hilton Village. Hard to believe it’s a mere two miles away. I look to the crown of the James River Bridge, where the mechanical gate lifts to let tall ships pass underneath. From that point I follow the headlights streaming in this direction, toward Newport News, toward me, certain I’ll be able to tell which ones belong to Angie.