

Sidestep

By Alessandra Siraco

I don't know what clouds are any more than Jessie does. I want to go skydiving when I'm old, though, that way it won't matter if I die. I tell Jessie that the clouds would probably feel cold.

"I think it's like when you jump off a jungle gym, except, I mean, it's longer," I say. I take a heavy clump of leaves and fling it off the hill so that they all flutter down, right near the spot where my sister Jessie is standing. She looks up when the leaves fall on her thick hair, and picks out the pieces from the strands. She's not too far below me on the hill, but it's pretty steep. I can see Grandpa's house from where I am, and his garden, weeded out and raked over, ready for the fall.

"But I'd want to go skydiving before I'm about to *die*, Mark," she says. "I mean, what fun is it if you go and die while doing it?"

"That's the point." I roll my eyes. "Duh. Because skydiving is scary, but if you go when you're gonna die anyways, it's not scary anymore. I don't want to get old."

I'm only nine and Jessie is seven, so we have a while to get old but I know that it comes up quick, or at least that's what Grandpa told me. Jessie ignores me and climbs over a fallen tree. The hill is in Grandpa's backyard, but he can't climb it anymore because his doctor said it was bad for his arthritis. It goes up into the parking lot of the YMCA, but it's so overgrown and crowded with trees that it obstructs the parking lot of the Y from view when you're in the yard. His house is a split level, painted dark brown, and it's on the corner of the street so the driveway is in the cul de sac. From the top of the hill, you can look out onto the front yard or the backyard. Sometimes Jessie and I used to spy on our cousins while they played kickball in the street. After a while, though, the trees got too big to see down into the yard very well, so now we can mostly just make forts.

I continue walking up higher on the hill than Jessie, because she's slower. I'm careful but I move faster than she does because I don't stop every two seconds to look at the flowers. Most of them are old because Grandpa hasn't been up here for a while, so all of his flowerbeds and vines and stuff like that are tangled together now. At least, I think it's not on purpose. He has a lot of little plants, and purple and pink mix together and I want to pull them apart; they aren't supposed to be mixed. They're supposed to be separate. Everything you plant is supposed to be separate. Sometimes going on the hill stresses me out, because everything is mixed together when it isn't supposed to be. Nothing is in order.

Jessie pulls more of the leaves out of her hair and glares at me. “You didn’t need to throw those leaves at me,” she says.

“I didn’t throw them *at* you,” I say. “They just fell on you. Do you think the Cousin Fort is still there?” I climb up further and walk to the edge of the hill that looks down on the house. I can see the roof and our parents, and Grandpa, sitting on the porch. It’s screened in and almost as high as the house, on the top level. The sound of someone’s radio is coming up from behind Grandpa’s yard, or maybe from the side of the Y, and it’s playing the Beatles. I recognize the song from when we listened to it in our mom’s car. Something about Mother Mary, and I used to think that it was talking about my mom until she told me it was religious, about calming down or something.

I don’t wait for Jessie but I know that she can catch up eventually. It’s not like this is our first time climbing the hill. It’s not even a hill, really; our cousin Paul thinks it’s in between a hill and a mountain. I definitely know it’s not a mountain, though. Anything you can climb in half an hour isn’t a mountain. Grandpa planted the flowers when my dad was little, and a giant birch tree sits at the top, where the Cousin Fort is. It’s October and the leaves are changing, but not on the hill. The hill is all pine trees and this one birch, still completely green. But if you look out to the fields where houses are being built, in between the houses are trees turning colors. I don’t like it. I don’t like the change of colors because it makes everything look different, and girls freak out about it. Things are better in the summer, before everything changes.

I get to the Cousin Fort, up against the birch tree, and I walk around, trying to decide if it’s safe enough for me to go inside. There was a huge storm yesterday, and it knocked down lots of trees. We didn’t have power at our house for seven hours and thirty-seven minutes. I timed it on Mom’s iPod.

Jessie catches up to me and kneels down. I crouch down too and look inside the broken-down Fort, between the branches that are still leaning against the tree. I want to straighten them out and fix the Fort, but it will just get ruined again. I hate when things are out of order and all of the branches are tilted, but I know that Jessie will make fun of me if I fix them.

“They’re just branches,” she’d say, and pull at her hair to make it straight, even though it never becomes straight just from her tugging it. “Stop being so neat.”

I climb inside, feeling the twigs rub against my scalp. The Fort is pretty big, big enough to fit the five of us, when we made it. Now it’s shrunk because it caved in a bit, but it’s still big enough for two. My jeans get wet and dirty from the moist earth that’s underneath the branches, and I feel the knees of my

jeans gather a circle of cool dirtiness. It bothers me. I should have stayed crouching so my pants didn't get dirty. I roll up the bottoms, messily, scrunch them up so that the dirt doesn't get the bottoms more disgusting.

"Gosh, Mark, go faster," Jessie says, shoving me deeper into the Fort. We can both fit, legs cramped up.

Most of what's left of the Fort isn't what we built. It's nature's buildup, fallen branches and leaves that got stuck, pine needles cramped together with sticky sap. But it's still really cool.

Jessie smells like onions and coconut and it's a weird combination that I've never noticed before, but now, she's sitting really close to me and it's gross. But she's my sister, so it's okay, I guess.

"Your breath kinda smells," I say, sniffing for emphasis. Jessie frowns at me and breathes a puff of air in my face.

"Ha," she says. She goes to get out of the Fort already, probably embarrassed that I told her she smells. She sticks her head out of the branches, but then she plops her butt back down, fast, and scurries towards me, dragging her butt along the layer of wet leaves. Her jeans must be getting wet but she doesn't try to crouch. She sits and pulls her knees up towards herself. "There's someone out there," she says.

"So what? It's probably someone from the Y." People are out on the hill all the time, teenagers smoking or parents talking on cell phones, because it's so close to the Y parking lot. As long as they don't try to climb all the way down the hill or try to talk to us, we're supposed to ignore them. Grandpa and our parents say that it's not a big deal as long as we don't talk to anyone and we leave when we see them.

"No," Jessie says. "He's not from the Y. He's wearing, like, a bandana or something."

I look through the branches but they're too thick to see all the way. I press my face up against the twigs, feel the rough bark against my cheeks. My face is wet with sweat, from sitting in the tiny Fort. I imagine the dirt and bits of bark rubbing off on my skin, stuck.

The man is standing on the edge of the hill, his back to the Y parking lot, his front facing the long grass that drops down the opposite direction from where Grandpa's yard is. His hair is curly and just past his shoulders, blonde. There's one braid twirling down the middle of his hair, but the rest is so bushy and thick it almost disguises the small braid in the middle.

"Mark," Jessie says, "get back. The guy is crazy."

I ignore her and push my right eye up closer to a gap in the branches. I don't want to go totally outside because who knows, if the guy actually is crazy, that would be a bad idea. And we're not supposed

to talk to people on the hill, anyways. But I want to look.

The guy has a boom box, the old kind that we had when I was little, before Mom got her iPod. He turns the music on softly but we're close enough to hear it wafting across the field at the top of the hill. There's no singing, just music, and a kind of wailing noise. He puts the boom box down and the long grass of the hill covers it, so I can only hear it, not even see the speakers.

There are usually people on the hill, coming from the Y or taking hikes or something, but none of them I've seen have been like this. They're always with other people, not alone, and they don't wear bandanas. The guy is also wearing bike shorts and a long, rough-looking poncho. I learned in D.A.R.E. that it's called a "drug rug." He's moving really slowly, like the teens from the Y do after they smoke on the side of the hill. Grandpa and my parents don't know that people smoke pot up here, but sometimes when Jessie and I and our cousins are up here we see them, and we know what they're doing because of the videos we had to watch in D.A.R.E. The guy doesn't have anything, though; he's just standing there. He starts rolling his wrists and then his neck. It's weird that he's alone and it scares me because he looks so much different than the other people who are usually on the hill or at the Y. I know that he's not homeless or anything because he takes out car keys and a faded black wallet and drops them next to the boom box. I see him close his eyes and he puts on earmuffs, bright green ones, which I don't understand because they must be blocking his hearing, but he's playing music.

The guy takes a few steps forward. He's facing the part of the hill that looks over the other peoples' yards, the part that used to just be fields. It extends for a little bit before dropping in cliffs of dirt and falling mossy plants. The long grass goes on for a while, across the field, down the cliff, weaving in and out of all the plants.

He raises his arms and I can smell his armpits, from all the way inside of our Fort. They smell worse than Jessie's breath. What kind of person hangs out on the hill alone? What if he is on drugs, and he just already took them, before he got here? What if they make him dangerous? I know that keys could be used as a weapon, if you hold them the right way. The guy's keychain is big and I bet the keys are sharp. All I have are pine needles.

He puts his arms back to his sides, straight. He looks young, the muscles in his forearms making motions when he moves his hands back and forth.

And then he starts swaying. The man sways back and forth, front and back, his hands always flat against his sides. I can still hear the music but it's not as loud, or I don't notice it as much. I look at the guy

standing alone on the top of the hill and think of the Beatles song that our mom plays sometimes, about a guy on a hill.

“He’s kind of weird,” I say.

One time Jessie sang “Fool on the Hill” when we were walking up the hill with our cousins, and we all yelled at her because we said the Beatles weren’t as good as Maroon 5, and then Paul said that Maroon 5 wasn’t good at all.

“He’s being creepy,” Jessie says. “He’s standing. On the hill.”

I put my knuckles against my cheek and crack my neck. “Do you think we should go?” I ask. I look at the man and get scared, too, because he’s just standing alone, and Jessie won’t be much help if something goes wrong.

Jessie shakes her head and her hair falls over her eyes. “No,” she says. “We can’t leave. He’s standing right there.” She pulls her knees up closer to her body and pushes some of the twigs out of her way.

I take the twigs she moved and put them back into place straight against the inside of the Fort. Jessie rolls her eyes. I look outside the Fort again, peering in between the two twigs I looked between before. A bug flies in front of the Fort.

Now the man is crouching down and jumping up, and then he puts his hands on the ground, in the tall grass. Half of his arms are covered by the grass, so it looks like he’s just floating, his butt in the air. His head is down near where his hands are, and the top of his hair and his earmuffs are covered by the grass too. He then goes down on his stomach, lifts his head up. Then he goes back to having his butt on the ground.

“He’s scary,” I say, looking at him, alone, his braid hanging down his back straight. I notice bits of gray interwoven in his hair, and I guess he must be older than he looks at first.

What if he decides to talk to us? What if he asks us where we live or why we’re here?

The guy turns his music up louder. He stands still, his arms at his side, looking ahead. I can hear Jessie breathing next to me. She breathes really loudly, and she still smells like onions.

“Do *you* think we should leave?” Jessie asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to leave. I think he’d see us.” I look outside, stick my head out of the Fort. “Let’s see if we can wait him out.” It’s still light out, and really warm. I peel a piece of the vine off my shoe and look at the leaves. They’re red and shiny but Grandpa told us once that only if there are three

leaves, red, and shiny it's poison ivy. Anything else is just for fun.

I burrow further into The Cousin Fort and hope that the guy can't see us. The Fort is something we built a few years ago, when we were first allowed to go up on the hill alone. Our other cousins decided to build it first, and Jessie and I helped too. We gathered sticks and stuck them against the big birch tree. I remember Paul and I organized the sticks, placing the larger ones together and the smaller ones in between, for support. Jessie didn't really help but she sat there and peeled the bark off some of the sticks until I told her not to. It was a long day but the adults were cooking something intense for Thanksgiving, so we had a lot of time up on the hill because we weren't allowed to be in the kitchen when the adults were cooking. We only went down to the house once to get stuffed peppers that Grandpa made from his garden.

Paul went down the hill first, to get some gloves, not because he was cold but because they would help us pick up sticks and stuff more easily without worrying about getting dirty. I wanted the gloves, actually. But he went down the hill and never came back up, so the rest of us figured that he either got killed by the Blair Witch (we watched the movie when our parents didn't know, and it was scary) or he was eating all of the stuffed peppers before we figured it out.

So Jessie, our other cousins, and I raced down the hill. I mostly slid on pine needles, because that was faster and because once I started it was hard to stop. When we were younger, Grandpa taught us how to properly go down the hill. We all used to find the biggest sticks we could and he showed us how to plant them with each step, for support. Then he taught us how to sidestep down, turning our bodies so our sides faced his house, moving one foot down first, digging its side into the path so that it was easier. But that day I didn't have time to sidestep. I wanted peppers.

I ran up to Grandpa's house. There are three steps in the front and three in the back, but the front steps are always covered with newspapers. Grandpa doesn't believe in reading the newspaper, but he gets it delivered because he ordered a subscription once, to try it, and doesn't want to bother canceling it.

I took the back steps, because they were closer. They were wet from rain and I slipped as I ran up them. The door to the back was open, so I knew that Paul was already inside, probably in the kitchen, eating. And he was. We all got in and saw him, hovering over the clear glass pan full of stuffed peppers. His Bruins sweatshirt was covered in fur from his cat Anne, which is a stupid name for a cat, and some of the stuffing from the peppers came out and got caught on his sleeve as he reached for another one.

Usually the adults get the peppers first, and then all the kids get the rest. All of the adults say that

even when we're grown up, that's how it's going to be. The kids will always go last, even when we're not kids anymore. I like being a kid; when I'm an adult, the peppers will just be peppers, and we'll just be watching the adults eat them before we can. I like running to get them from the hill, or from the cul de sac, or from downstairs in the basement, and seeing the leftovers, just the leftovers, picking the ones that look the best, the ones that look the juiciest. You can tell which peppers are hot by the skin; if it's crinkly around the middle part, we think it's hotter. Usually the crinkly ones are the ones left when the kids get them, and they are always hot.

That day, Grandpa's kitchen smelled like the stuffing, rich, like Thanksgiving, and the photo of us all from when we went to Disney World sat on the brick island in between the pepper tray and the picture that he had just gotten, of the man looking in the mirror looking in the mirror looking in the mirror. Paul was still eating the peppers but it looked like the adults had already eaten the ones they wanted. The peppers are so hot that you have to have a glass of milk with them. People think that water does the trick but we know better. Milk is the only thing that works, and when we come over in the fall, Grandpa makes sure he has a lot of it in his fridge. Especially for Jessie, because she likes the spicy peppers but she can't handle the spiciness very well, even though she won't admit it.

Right now, Jessie looks like she might cry, but she doesn't. Instead, she turns and takes a piece of her hair, pulls it out, and sticks it in her mouth. She pulls it back and forth between her teeth. She pulls it out and moves the hair down a little bit on her fingers, wraps the ends around, and puts it back in her teeth.

"Jessie," I say, "what are you doing? That's disgusting."

"I'm flossing." She looks at me. "What? It's just hair."

"Yeah," I say, "but it's still *disgusting* to floss with it."

Jessie adjusts her legs so that they are in a different position. "I don't know why you're being so mean today, Mark," she says. "Mom told you to be nice to me. Unlike last weekend."

"Whatever," I say. "Last weekend you were being weird." She's being weird right now, so weird, flossing with her hair, but I don't say that to her because I know she's scared of the creepy guy and I'll get in trouble if I'm mean to her when she's scared. "Does Justin mind if you floss with your hair?"

"Nope."

"Even when other people are around?"

"Whatever," she says. "We're not *dating* or anything. Mom won't let me yet. I only see him when

he comes over after school.”

“Is he a good boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he’s alright,” she says, already forgetting that she told me they weren’t boyfriend-girlfriend. She shrugs and picks out another piece of hair to floss with. Disgusting. She’s lucky any guy will date her if she flosses with her hair. At least her hair looks clean. Sort of.

“Justin gave you the bear, right?” I say.

“Dolores.”

“And the colored giraffe?”

“Dolores Two.”

“And the peacock toy?”

“Dolores Three.”

“See, he’s really nice.”

“I guess so.”

“Except he cheated on you.”

“Well, there’s that.” Jessie throws her floss hair out of the Fort. I don’t see where it goes but I want to make sure I’m not going to walk over there later. “But I mean, he didn’t cheat on me, really. He just went to Meghan’s house after school instead of to our house.” When I was seven like Jessie, going to another girl’s house after school was cheating.

“I dunno,” I say. “I think Justin’s kind of a tool because of that.”

“What’s a ‘tool’?”

“You’ll learn about it, later,” I say. “It’s hard to explain. It’s like, someone who wears his sunglasses on the back of his head.”

“Huh?”

“Like, someone who does stupid things.”

“Like skydive when you’re old?” Jessie smiles and pulls the last of her hair out of her teeth.

“It’s not weird to want to do that,” I say. I want to feel the wind against my old, wrinkly skin. What else is old skin good for? It must be worn out and thinned out, like hair thins out from age, so you can probably feel the air better, harder, against your cheek. I want to feel the rip of the air against the soft part of my cheek bone. Skydiving. It’s so scary if you care about dying, but when you have nothing to lose, when you just have to die soon anyways, and your body is all broken-in and used to the elements, there’s

nothing better to do.

“I think it’d be cool to skydive if I could eat the clouds,” Jessie says.

“That’s dumb.”

“No, it’s not. If you could just, like, open your mouth when you’re skydiving, wouldn’t that be cool? You’d be eating part of the earth.”

“You’re eating part of the earth when you eat a carrot.”

“But not like that,” Jessie says. Her hair is extra curly today because it’s humid out, or at least that’s what she told me. It’s in between brown and blonde but she says it’s brown because she wants to pick a color. She picks at the bark on the twigs in front of us, her chipped blue nail polish chipping more as she peels the bark off one of the twigs. “I mean, what do you think clouds are? Are they cold? Or wet? Like, is it like eating regular cotton candy, or like eating wet, cold cotton candy?”

The branch that Jessie is playing with sags a little and the one next to it falls. I push Jessie’s hands aside and straighten out the branch, putting the scraps of the bark and her chipped-off blue nail polish outside the Fort. I stick my head all the way back in. The guy is still out there, and a woman is there now, too. She has gray hair and she stands next to the guy and puts on earmuffs, pink ones. She reaches up and I see a thin tattoo on the top part of her arm that circles all the way up it. They do different poses, and they’re talking to each other.

Now that there’s two of them, I don’t know how long it will take before they leave. We have to go back down the hill before dinnertime but I don’t know how to get past the guy and woman to get down.

There’s nothing but pine needles, tons of pine needles, dry on top and wet underneath. I ruffle through some of them, picking at the dry ones, separating them by size, putting the blue paint scraps on the side, as far away as I can reach without moving out of the Fort again.

“You’re such a freak, Mark,” Jessie says, watching what I’m doing.

“Shut up,” I say. “You just flossed. With your hair.”

“Whatever. You’re just jealous ‘cause you don’t have a girlfriend and I’m boyfriend-girlfriend with someone.”

“I don’t want a girlfriend yet.” That means I’d have to do things for her and with her, and do things older people do, like open doors for the girl.

I look to the Y parking lot, the tip of it that’s visible from inside the Fort. It’s pretty much empty, except for a few cars near the door. I can see down the hill a little bit, only about halfway, and as I glance

over, I see Grandpa. If I can see him from the Fort, I know he must be up way higher than he's supposed to be. He's near a small birch tree. There's a green kneeler next to him but he's not using it, because his knees are stained with dirt like mine are. He's wearing tan pants and I can see the dirt marks on his knees even from inside the Fort.

I watch him bend down and rake dirt over flower beds, carefully moving up a few steps, and then down, sidestepping like he taught us. It's way further than the doctor told him was safe for him to walk but he's not even staying in one place. He picks up weeds and tosses them in a pile, and slowly works his way from purple to pink. I want to ask him for help and tell him to get down, that he's not supposed to be this high up the hill, that he's old and he might get hurt, but if I yell across the field, the guy and the woman will hear me. And Jessie won't get it and she'll probably yell without thinking. So I don't tell her, but I watch Grandpa move around on the hill. He is old but he doesn't look it right now. He's moving on the same half-worn path that Jessie and I were just on. He kicks aside some pine needles and bends back down, lifts up a flower, and looks at a tiny pink bud near the stem.

Jessie and I huddle inside the Fort, watch this old guy and woman do some weird poses on the hill, and watch Grandpa do stuff that we just did but that he's not supposed to do, and I know that we have to move. The two of us have to move, towards them, eventually.

"I guess we should run," I say. The guy and the lady are old, apparently, and I think we can outrun them if they try to chase us. Grandpa will be there and I don't want him to get hurt, either. Jessie wouldn't help. She'd probably just start flossing or something.

"Why?"

"Because, if we walk they're going to talk to us."

"Why would they talk to us?"

"Because they're weird, and we're not."

Jessie nods and takes a breath. I look at her hands and they're running over the branches again, peeling off the bark.

"Jessie," I say, "stop it. You're peeling off the bark."

"So what?"

"It's annoying."

"Your face is annoying."

"Your mom's face is annoying."

Jessie smiles and I start to but then I look out the crack of the Fort again and see the man and woman standing with his arms out, one of the earmuffs on the guy's ear and one of them off, both earmuffs slightly high up on the lady's ears.

"Are you ready?" I ask. I shove some of the broken bits of bark out of the Fort onto the matted grass outside.

"Yup," Jessie says. She pushes her hair onto her back.

I crawl out of the Fort first, my knees skimming on the moist mud, and I feel Jessie hit into me, following too closely behind me. She whacks into the bottom of my shoes and then backs up a little. I stand up outside the Fort, grab her hand—it's wet, I don't know from what, I don't want to know from what—and sprint across the long grass.

It's hard to run because the grass is so thick, and I feel it pulling me back, tugging at the bottoms of my rolled-up mud-stained pants, as I hold Jessie's sticky hand tighter. We make it across the field, behind the guy and lady. I can hear Jessie panting next to me.

I almost fall down on the pine needles, and Jessie tugs me up. The guy turns around and looks at us. I can see him as we move closer to the edge of the hill towards the path.

Jessie pulls me and we move forward. She doesn't make eye contact with the guy but I do, and his face looks older than it seemed from far away, more wrinkles, even though his hair is so long, not like most old people wear it. He smiles a little bit. The guy's hair has gray streaks but the lady's hair is just gray, and even running, sprinting past them, I can see the white wad of her hair.

I feel my skin stretch against the wind, tight. Jessie's hand is still sweaty but I grip it hard, and I smell her onion-coconut breath as we breathe deeply and run. The laces on my sneakers begin to become untied, and my ankles pound with each step as we move quickly across the pavement. It's warmer now that we're sprinting and I'm sweating and my gray Cape Cod sweatshirt is beginning to get stains in the armpits. I wish I had on a t-shirt underneath it, so I could take the sweatshirt off.

I feel the air in my eyes, bringing water to the front of them, and then the wind whips the tears back so they glide from the corner of my eyes towards my ears, and I wonder if maybe this is what skydiving feels like, when you're old.