

Welcome Home

AN ANTHOLOGY ON LOVE AND ADOPTION



featuring outstanding works by

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Carlos and the Fifteen-Year-Old Heart

by Adi Alsaid

Carlos Herald was born to a couple of strangers in a hospital in Mexico City. Not long afterward—a feeding, a medical checkup, a nurse’s hurried coffee break—he was put in the arms of Janice and Cody Herald, two longtime Iowa residents who’d relocated to the Mexican metropolis a few months earlier, and who, for unknown reasons, were stuck in the year 1985.

They hardly noticed anymore, except for the earthquake, and Carlos wouldn’t either until the age of six. His first-grade classroom: colorful construction paper posters, an animal-alphabet decal on the wall, an inexperienced teacher standing in front of the whiteboard. Carlos loved her flower print dresses, the softness of her voice. But she liked to give lectures and, one day, unaware that the subject matter of genetics was far too ambitious for her audience, she let slip an innocent comment about Carlos’s parents being unlike everyone else’s.

Twenty-five sets of eyes looked in his direction, and six-year-old Carlos slouched in his seat. He didn’t understand what Ms. Nancy had meant, but he did not like how it made him feel. Ms. Nancy went on, oblivious: Carlos was not inheriting certain things from his parents, unlike most people. Someone in the back snickered. Carlos slouched further, a terrible hollow in the pit of his stomach.

This incident led to confusion, curiosity, and the eventual question posed to his dad a few nights later during story time. Cody was leaning near the soft orange night-light, reading in his mellifluous voice when Carlos interrupted the Roald Dahl tale. “What makes our family different from everyone else?” he asked, the hurt still clinging to his voice.

His dad slipped a finger into the book and closed it gently, immediately understanding. He called Janice over, and when she entered the room he gave her a look. “Already?” she asked. He nodded, and she sighed, then came to sit at the foot of Carlos’s bed. Carlos loved the weight of her on the mattress, loved how close they were to him, even if the quiet moment that followed was a little scary.

“Yes,” Cody admitted finally, “we are different than others. Your mom’s blue eyes have nothing to do with your brown eyes. My red hair has nothing to do with your brown hair. These colors will never mix, because they are part of different palettes.” Cody brushed hair out of Carlos’s eyes, and Janice laid her hand on his foot, which was poking out from beneath his Looney Tunes covers.

“And yes,” Cody went on, “you live in a future world that we will probably never know or understand.”

“But we love you,” Janice cut in. “And our relationship is no different than anyone else’s, no matter what decade we inhabit or whose genes you’ve inherited.” Some of the words were hard to understand, but they sank in anyway, absorbed through his heart, not his head.

After that there were a couple of years more of confusion—not necessarily about his relationship with his parents, but from navigating the effects of a decade he’d never lived in. Then the hell of middle school, the awkwardness of well-meaning friends who didn’t understand, the meanness of those who did not mean well though they thought they understood. Every year, the earthquake. It was always forgotten by his parents by the time January came around and 1985 reset, and Carlos did not know how to warn them.

Until Carlos turned fifteen, when the only thing that seemed to matter to him was a girl.

That Carlos loved a girl at fifteen would not have been of any interest to anyone. Everyone loves someone at fifteen, usually recklessly. Fifteen is more or less when love begins, whether you have loved your family for your entire life or whether you won’t admit to loving anyone for another ten years.

The fifteen-year-old heart does two things well: it fears, and it loves.

Lianne Lucy moved to town the summer before sophomore year, arriving in a flurry of moving trucks and little, bespectacled siblings. From across the street, Carlos watched her carry in box after box overflowing with books, not trusting the movers to treat them with enough reverence. Carlos tried to resist falling inexplicably in love too quickly, because he never believed the love stories that unfolded in fast-forward. But his heart resisted the criticisms and gave itself up so quickly that he didn’t even have time to eat breakfast before the organ forced him to cross the street and say hello.

His friends would later tell him that first encounters with love interests should always be electronic, and that he had made a mistake. Maybe Carlos’s upbringing in a 1985 household disagreed, or maybe the attraction was too strong to adhere to current first-hello norms. When he walked onto her lawn, Lianne eyed him as if she knew his heart had thrown itself across the street and Carlos was just following behind. She put her hands in the pockets of her dress and waited for him to speak.

Carlos wasn’t particularly talkative, nor particularly prepared, since he believed speaking before breakfast should always be avoided. The only thing that he could

think to say was “hi.” Lianne lobbed the word back at him like an expert conversationalist, which put Carlos right back in the position he was in at the start of this paragraph. It was hot outside, and he could feel his t-shirt clinging to his lower back, his least favorite feeling in the world.

“My parents are stuck in 1985,” he said, not sure why.

Lianne did not seem impressed, but she didn’t turn away. Her warm brown eyes blinked once, and then she smiled. “Cool. Tell me more.”

He couldn’t shut up the whole day, telling her every single thing about his parents that he knew. How they didn’t have cell phones, and so they didn’t constantly check in like some parents do. Unlike his friends, who always had to scroll through *Documentaries about Depressing Things* or *Old, Vaguely Misogynistic Romances*, Carlos’s Netflix account remained solely his, the suggestions perfectly suited for his tastes.

He told Lianne about New Year’s Eve, and how every year at the massive neighborhood party his aunt and uncle throw, Janice and Cody Herald arrive with party hats that wish everyone a happy 1985. He did not tell her about the earthquake. Lianne kept her hands in her dress pockets most of the time, and she laughed as if no one ever told her to be wary of boys who cross the street to say hi before they even have their breakfast.

When he got back home, he was so giddy that he did all his chores for the week in one frenzied hour before bed. His mom raised an eyebrow at his dad at the sparkling kitchen floors, the dusted blinds, the garbage out at the curb, and an empty bag tucked perfectly into the bin.

“Weird,” Cody said, folding his newspaper, wondering if maybe this was some unique form of teenage rebellion. But Janice, who had been peeking through the blinds intermittently throughout the day, had a better guess.

“My baby’s in love,” she whispered.

With the free time their son had provided for them by tidying up, Janice and Cody popped in a VHS of *The Karate Kid*. They held each other close, thinking not so much of Mr. Miyagi, but rather of Carlos and how fast he was growing up.

It was a logical expectation that Lianne would attend Carlos’s school in the fall, but it was a convenient twist of fate that put her in three of his eight classes. And who knows what wonderful thing was to blame for the seating arrangement placing them side-by-side. At first, he could only smile at her, say hi, maybe bring up another strange eighties thing about his parents. But Carlos eventually

got better at saying things that made sense and could lead to conversation, and by the second week of school, they became close friends.

He kept his love to himself, not yet sure what to do with it or if Lianne would welcome it. At home, his parents smirked whenever he mentioned her name, which he did many, many times. He never quite caught what they meant by these smirks. Instead, he'd take advantage of the fact that his parents seemed to be okay with him talking about Lianne. Talking about Lianne was one of his favorite things now.

Some of his friends liked to mess with his parents whenever they came over. They'd do this by bringing up current events and modern technology, amused by the way the Heralds' eyes would glaze over at the mention of Wi-Fi, delighted by how the Heralds would laugh hysterically whenever someone mentioned that Michael Jackson was white and dead.

Lianne, though, was fascinated by them, fascinated by 1985 and how it felt to still be there. The first time she came over to do homework with Carlos, she was polite and nonchalant about their eightiesness.

Cody and Janice were nervous that day, probably more so than Carlos and Lianne. They paced in the living room, unable to sit still on their chintz couch, worried that Lianne would flee at the ugly pastel carpet that constantly needed cleaning, the neon wallpaper, the ubiquitous rubber-necked lamps. They were worried that Lianne might not understand, and that Carlos would blame them for it.

They heard the jingle of keys in the front door, and both of them leaped into positions of imagined casualness. When Carlos pushed open the door and saw them standing the way they were, he hesitated for a terrible second in which it seemed as if he might be regretting everything. Then he stepped inside, casting a smile backward at Lianne, who waltzed in confidently behind him. She looked straight at Cody and Janice, eyes warm with kindness. She ignored Cody's perm and Janice's shoulder pads. She said nothing of the furniture. Instead she waved and smiled, then cleaned her smudged glasses with the hem of her skirt as Carlos introduced everyone.

"We've heard so much about you," Janice said. "You're just as lovely as ..."

"Mom!" Carlos interrupted.

Janice blushed, and Cody put a comforting hand on his wife's back. The room tensed for just a second, fears approaching reality. Then Lianne slipped her glasses back on and said, "It's really nice to meet you guys."

That night, textbooks splayed on Carlos's bed between them, Lianne surprised herself by cutting the distance between them in one literal fell swoop and kissing Carlos for the first time. He felt as if he was traveling through dimensions, even though every ounce of his being remained exactly where it was. More than that, his entire consciousness became focused on the spot where their lips met, not forgetting himself, but exactly the opposite, realizing where he was entirely. The kiss was imperfect (he kept his mouth open when Lianne kept hers closed), sloppy (a streak of saliva on Carlos's chin), yet transporting all the same.

They kissed again, a little better this time: less slobbery, fewer teeth. Then they turned their attention back to their homework for a second, although any attempt to focus led them right back toward each other. Downstairs, Janice and Cody cleaned the dishes that had piled up during dinner, listening to Prince on the radio. Cody would swear several 1985s later that the glass he broke that night was the result of a surge of joy that shot down his spine the very moment Carlos was kissing Lianne. Janice, a committed eye-roller of all things New Age, would never admit that she felt the same surge of joy.

Four weeks later, Carlos and Lianne got to spend a full night together for the first time when his parents celebrated their anniversary at a nearby bed-and-breakfast. They weren't quite sure which anniversary it was, because their condition made math tricky, but they felt as if they were about due for an important one.

Carlos and Lianne used the occasion to feel a little more grown-up. They ordered pizza and watched movies in bed, less clothed than they normally would be if his parents were still around. They tried to be simultaneously cool and appreciative about this, which resulted in a fair amount of giggling, touching, blushing, and one pizza slice dropped face down on the carpet when Lianne could no longer hold onto it through her laughter. Mostly chaste, they fell asleep in each other's arms (and legs, and more).

At 7:19 a.m. Carlos woke up in a panic, suddenly recalling the date.

On September 19, 1985, at 7:19 a.m. Mexico City was struck by an 8.0-magnitude earthquake that completely crumbled more than four hundred buildings. And every September, Carlos's adoptive parents from Iowa relived it, gripped in the terror of shaking, especially when you've never known shaking quite like this before.

Carlos tried to remember to mark it down each year, so that his parents wouldn't be taken by surprise, the fear and destruction of it all. But somehow he

always managed to forget. By the time January hit and 1985 reset, it felt as if his family did, too.

Carlos grabbed his phone and looked up the bed-and-breakfast his parents were staying in, then dialed the listed number. He asked the tired-sounding receptionist to connect him to the Heralds' room.

He hoped he wasn't late. The phone connected to his parents' room and rang. He hoped the building had withstood 1985. The phone rang. Carlos looked at Lianne lying on her stomach, unperturbed, bathed in the soft gray morning light and the blue glow of the television they'd left on. The phone rang. Carlos hung up and stared at his cell screen as if it was to blame for everything.

Carlos climbed out of bed and quickly dressed, then leaned over his bed and kissed Lianne's cheek, placing a hand on her back to gently wake her. When she opened her eyes, he told her he had to go. Worry immediately filled her eyes, so he kissed her again and told her it was okay, that she could stay, sleep in, snoop around, run around naked, order more pizza, do their homework, never leave, whatever.

He had barely taken a driving lesson before, but he grabbed the keys hanging near the front door, got in his mom's maroon Oldsmobile Ciera, and turned the ignition as if he'd done it hundreds of times before.

Sunday morning, and the city was calm. The usually hellish traffic gave way to empty roads, the few cars around driving at a glacial pace, as if the drivers had never meant to get behind the wheel. Most people on the road respected red lights for only a second, then rolled through, even though, unlike Carlos, they were clearly in no hurry, had no pressing need to move on. Carlos kept his eye on the dashboard clock, thinking the shaking had been over for three minutes now. Five. Ten. He sped past cop cars with their lights on for no reason. Nervously slapping at the steering wheel, Carlos cursed the existence of distance, distance that had to be traversed. There was an unavoidable bond pulling him to his parents, a magnetic yank that felt more immediate the closer he got to them. It was not exactly magnetism, unless magnetism is the reason why people need each other (Who really knows how these things work?), in which case that's exactly what it was.

He pulled up in front of the bed-and-breakfast, turning on his hazard lights, the Mexican symbol for doing whatever you want with your car. Running right past the still-tired receptionist, Carlos made his way to their room and knocked, only then hearing the whimpering from inside. His parents could be stuck beneath rubble. The building could have collapsed in 1985; it could have

burned. He did not understand enough about his parents' world to know if they were safe, and so he pounded on the door. What could have been a cry or could have been nothing escaped from the room. He called out for them, panic creeping into his voice.

That he could have a night with Lianne like the one he'd just had followed by this awful morning made absolutely no sense to him, even if he understood more than most that nonsense very much fit into this world.

Carlos sprinted back downstairs. He thought of Lianne, and if she'd be safe if an earthquake struck right now. Would she sleep through it, mouth slightly open, hair streaked across her face? Would she stir, look around, think it all a dream? Would she calmly take cover and simply wait for it to pass?

He wondered if this was what parenthood was like, never knowing if the people you cared about most were safe. The receptionist was flipping through a magazine, and calmly set it down when Carlos begged him to come upstairs with his master keys.

Three minutes later, the shaking had been over for nearly thirty minutes, or thirty years, depending on your point of view. The receptionist jingled the set of keys as if he was auditioning for a role in a horror movie. Carlos had to keep himself from snatching them away and pushing the door open himself.

When they entered the room, Carlos saw that his parents were huddled beneath a desk, the room perfectly intact except for the unmade bed. They saw Carlos and their tears changed from fearful to joyous. Carlos sprinted to his parents, not sure why he was crying. It was his fifteen-year-old heart that was to blame, loving and fearing all at once. The receptionist raised his eyebrows and walked away, a little jealous about the exchanged tears.

They embraced, arms and legs and more. They wiped at their tears. Carlos assured them he was okay, and they were okay. He didn't tell them they'd survived before and would survive again, didn't tell them the city had built itself back up long ago. They told him they'd tried to call but the landlines had been down. They didn't tell him they had a strange sense of déjà vu throughout the shaking, didn't tell him that the room they were in was still a heap of rubble and broken things.

They got up and brushed themselves off. Carlos had not had breakfast yet, and so all he could think to say was "hi." The three of them just kind of smiled awkwardly and cried at each other for a few moments. In addition to inhabiting different years, they were also different ages, and sometimes the gap between ages is even greater than the gap between years. Carlos was fifteen, his parents were

both forty-seven, and that three-decade span hung around them like an elephant in the room that also had not had its breakfast.

“Is everyone okay?” they asked each other. Yes. “Have a good time before the earthquake?” Absolutely. “How is Lianne?” Carlos blushed and looked away.

Downstairs, the receptionist sent an email to his parents for the first time in months. Below the crust of the earth, the tectonic plates were done shifting around, having comfortably settled into themselves almost an hour ago.

Then Carlos decided he should go, since everyone was safe and he was kind of interrupting their anniversary weekend. He was also interrupting his own planned cuddle session with Lianne. The receptionist felt all these plans in the air and sighed, wishing for more. More breakfasts, more cuddles, more anything.

Janice and Cody Herald stood at the doorway, watching their son move down the hall. They were still shaken, no pun intended. More than anything they marveled at the person Carlos had become. They felt that they were good parents, but his marvelousness was not something they could take credit for. Somehow, in fifteen short 1985s, this kid they had raised revealed himself to be an astounding person, kind and caring, brave, fearless, and taller than they’d expected.

Carlos returned to the car still parked in the middle of the street, unperturbed. He found a station that played eighties music and headed back home, hoping Lianne had fallen back asleep, just for the pleasure of slipping back into bed with her. Cars still drove at their Sunday speed, rushing through red lights and then slowing until they reached the next one. Sunlight streamed into the car, causing Carlos to marvel at the strangeness of the world, how fear could give way to calm, and vice versa.

He wanted to make a note in his phone for next year, to suggest his parents leave the city during the earthquake. But then “Video Killed the Radio Star” started playing, which was his favorite song (though he’d never admit that to his parents), causing the thought to flutter away, swept out by the wind coming in through the open window.

Back in the bed-and-breakfast, his parents felt their son’s thoughts shift from them to Lianne, with equal parts sadness and joy. Then they went downstairs to find a restaurant that was still intact, and ordered themselves some breakfast.

Carlos failed to spot the significance of the relieved yet eager drive back home, his parents in the rearview mirror, Lianne waiting for him in bed. It would have been perfect for him to turn on his hazard lights and stop the car exactly halfway between them and her, and consider the shift about to take place. Except Carlos

was too wrapped up in thoughts of Lianne to recognize what was happening. The spot on the back of her neck that, when kissed, would instantly send goose bumps down her arms. The faces she made when bored in class, trying to make him laugh. The graze of her fingers on his, the way it felt to have love in his life. He sped right past the midpoint, the way most of us would.

Adi Alsaid was born and raised in Mexico City, where he now lives, writes, coaches basketball, and drowns food in hot sauce. He's the author of the YA novels *Let's Get Lost*, *Never Always Sometimes*, and *North of Happy*.

"Sometimes, the obvious divide in a relationship ends up being not much of a divide at all. That's what I was going for in this story. I wanted the matter of adoption, the apparent chasm between parents and child, to be second or third fiddle. To age, earthquakes, but mostly to love."

Strong Enough

by Karen Akins

The light over the kitchen table turns green. It blinks on and off like a dying lightning bug. Everyone stops eating and stares at me.

This is it.

I gulp down a last bite of cinnamon oatmeal.

I've always wondered why the emergency-signal designers went with green and not red. I mean, red would make more sense. Red means *stop*. Stop crime. Stop the bad guys. Stop the runaway train. But then Dad pointed out one time that green means *go*. Go fight it.

I tap the end of my spoon against my chin, and it accidentally bends in half. But I straighten it out before Mom has the chance to cluck about it. All the times I've pictured this moment, I've jumped up, run out the door in a rush. But right now, all I can think is *stall*.

"Is it bad?" I ask.

Mom leans over to read the info screen, squinting. "Define bad."

"Bad. Like, a crashing school bus full of children bad. Off a bridge. Into a whirlpool of piranhas."

"That's *exactly* what it is, Gracie."

"Really?" I sit up straight and drop my spoon entirely.

"No." She tosses me a towel to clean up the oatmeal that spilled. "It's a car broken down on Sycamore and Third. You've got this."

"But it's blocking a lane of traffic," I say, swinging the screen around to face me. "And people are using the turning lane to get around it. That's dangerous. Kind of."

I pick up my spoon and shovel in a few more bites of oatmeal. "Maybe they should send someone else."

"You've already declined two test missions. And you're the closest super." Mom gives me a pointed look. The *with-great-power-comes-great-blah-blah-blah* look.

"Super in *training*," I say.

"Super." She kisses me on top of the head. "I'm not sure why you're so

nervous. You could lift a passenger vehicle in your sleep. In fact, I think you might have done that once. When you were seven and going through a sleepwalking phase. Oh, man—and I thought the newborn phase was hard ...” Mom might be sitting across from me at the kitchen table, but I can tell from her vacant expression that she’s far away in Memoryland. “Do you want a ride?”

“Nah, I’ll take my bike.” It would give me a little more avoidance time. Plus, it’s only a few blocks, right on the way to school, and a warm day for April. I try to switch my demeanor to calm, cool, collected—hoping my innards will follow, but they stay a twisting mass of nerves. My most recent simulations didn’t go great. Okay, they went awful. The last one, I forgot to move the bystanders back and knocked down a tree by accident. I have only my Test Mission left before I move on to an apprenticeship. But if I flub it, they’ll make me start over in the basics seminar.

Needs to harness her strength. That’s what the eval had said.

“Wear a sweater,” says Mom.

“Yes, smother.”

“A smother with a daughter who’s warm enough!” she calls over her shoulder.

We lock eyes in a stubborn-off, but a laugh quivers at the edge of her mouth. I win.

I still grab a hoodie.

She can’t make me wear spandex, though.

As soon as my parents realized they had adopted a super (even they had to admit my tendency to heft my crib above my head was a bit ... much), they read books and went to workshops—anything and everything they could get their hands on—to help them figure out the whole trans-powered family thing. Which, it turns out, is about as easy and as difficult as figuring out the whole any-powered family thing. But they did appreciate the tips on handling tantrums when your toddler can punch a hole through a wall. A brick wall.

Our garage is a shrine to my destructive wake. Broken toys, broken furniture, a whole pile of broken doorknobs, broken appliances. But Dad can’t blame last year’s grill disaster on me. I pull my hoodie on tighter and shiver against the morning chill that hasn’t lifted as I open the garage door. Oh, to have fireball breath like my friend Emma.

Traffic has backed up to the next intersection, blocking the flow on two side streets. *Crap.* I pedal faster.

The super assigned to oversee the test hasn't arrived yet. A guy in a Volvo waves happily to me. I wave back, hoping for a few "friendliness" bonus points. Yeah, you smile, Mr. Broken Volvo, even though we both know the only reason you're so happy is that a trainee superhero is a heck of a lot cheaper than a real one. Or even a tow truck.

But then he points toward another vehicle, about five yards ahead. The Volvo isn't the vehicle that's stuck. The thirty-ton concrete mixer truck is.

"*Craaaaaap*," I whisper.

"Finally!" The driver of the truck sticks her head out the window. "I've been waiting almost half an hour."

"Sorry," I say. "I'm, umm, still in training."

"What? You're not even a real one? Great." She says the last word just loud enough that I know she meant me to hear it.

"We can start as soon as my supervisor shows up."

"Like *that* one?" The lady points toward the sky.

Sure enough, a rep from the Enhanced Abilities Council hovers above a maple tree, its fuchsia buds on the verge of unfurling. I can't remember what work name he goes by. Blaze, maybe? It's something fast like that.

His lips purse together in a taut line. He gives a little wave with his tablet. I'm not sure if it means "Hello" or "Proceed" or "This is too early in the morning to oversee a teenager tackling a traffic jam."

Blast. I snap my fingers. His name is Blast.

I rest my hands on top of the Volvo's roof and take a long, steadying breath like they teach us in training.

Creak ... groan ... creeeak.

"Umm, Miss?" says Mr. Volvo.

"Hmm?"

"I think you're hurting my shocks." Mr. Volvo taps my elbow. Sure enough, I'm pressing his car nearly to the ground. I let go so fast it bounces a good foot off the pavement.

"Sorry." I hear the *tap-tap-tap* of Blast's tablet above me. Points being docked before I've even started.

Okay. Back to the calming breath.

Honnnnnnnnk. The concrete truck lady leans on her horn. “Come on!”

I look up. Blast makes a move-it-along motion.

Creeeeeeeak.

I’m pressing down on the car again.

“Sorry.” I let up easy this time, barely a jostle, and take two steps back.

I’m too strong. The thought bubbles up unbidden, and the images of all the broken things in our garage follow closely behind. But then I look over at the concrete truck. I’ve never lifted anything that heavy. Ever. I’m not strong enough.

“Take your time,” says Blast, but I’m sure to him everyone is a snail. The truck lady huffs and throws her hands up in the air, and even Mr. Volvo lets out an impatient sigh.

I suck in another breath. Okay. I can do this.

I walk up to the truck and find a good, solid grip point on the frame. I begin to lift.

Tap-tap-tap.

Toot.

“Could you step out of your cab, please?” I ask the truck lady. She heads over to join the group of bystanders.

I start to lift the vehicle again. *Tap-tap-tap.* Double toot.

Check that the ignition is off, brakes are on. I look up to get the go-ahead from Blast. He gives me a bored thumbs-up.

I recenter myself. Begin to lift. My arms strain. It’s an odd sensation for me, to feel resistance, a challenge for my muscles.

Nothing.

I step back and stare at the truck. Thirty tons of impossible.

I bite my lip. Maybe I could scoot the truck out of the way. I’ll still have to figure out a way to lift it over the median into the parking lot.

Tap-tap-tap.

I look up at Blast. I can’t tell if he’s grading me at this point or checking his email.

While I stand there debating, the driver whips out her phone.

“I’m calling a tow,” she announces, and the crowd bursts into a cheer.

My whole body droops. I look over at the parking lot. It’s twenty feet, but it might as well be twenty miles. But then I see a familiar minivan, with its dented hood where I leaned too hard and an “I <3 My Super” bumper sticker.

Mom.

She must have driven the long route here to get around the traffic.

The tow truck rounds the corner, lights flashing. If he gets involved, I can smooch this test goodbye. Mom opens her car door, probably to tell me to hop in, to let the professionals take over. But she walks ten steps forward and points at an empty spot.

“It will fit here, I think,” she says. “What do you think, Gracie?”

We lock eyes in a stubborn-off. My lip curls up. She won.

I’ve got this.

I take a final deep breath. The oxygen rushes through my veins and fuels every cell, down to my toes and deep into my core.

I don’t hesitate. I grab the undercarriage of the truck and hoist it up, not pausing until it’s over my head. I grit my teeth in concentration. Every step is a strain. I totter at the curb. The crowd gasps, but I regain my footing and place the vehicle down as gently as an egg crate.

The crowd claps, then dies down and moves on. Truck lady doesn’t bother to thank me. Blast enters a final *tap-tap-tap* and flies away.

But I did it.

A chunk of the curb is smashed to dust. The sod in the median looks as if a pair of moles did the cha-cha underneath. I won’t find out for a week if I passed.

But I did it.

Mom walks over and hands me a hot cocoa. We lean against the front bumper of the car. I’m careful to avoid caving it in.

“I almost wasn’t strong enough,” I say. Not for this situation. Probably not for a lot of situations. I trace my finger along the dent that reminds me that next time, the opposite might be the problem. “Sometimes, I worry that—”

“Gracie,” Mom says, following her finger behind mine and taking my hand, “you’re the perfect amount of strong.”

Karen Akins writes humorous, light sci-fi for young adults and the young in

spirit. When not writing or reading, she loves lightsaber dueling with her two sons and forcing her husband to watch BBC shows with her. Her YA time travel novels *Loop* and *Twist* are available now from St. Martin's Press.

“When I finished my graduate degree in counseling, I had no idea what I wanted to do with it. But I did know that I had a heart to bring hope and encouragement to hurting people. I ended up in a position as a regional director of a nonprofit adoption agency.

Over the next few years, I had the privilege of counseling birth parents who faced some of the most difficult decisions they'd ever make, of preparing and educating adoptive parents, and welcoming children to their forever families. I never could have predicted the beautiful and bittersweet journey it would be.

And on a completely selfish level, I also never could have predicted the joy and completeness that my precious nephew brought to my life when he joined our family through adoption. I love you, Noah!”

The Sign

by Erica M. Chapman

On my way to school I pass a sign that's in front of nothing. The painted letters have faded away, and all that remains are an A and an F. The withered wood has even warped toward the vacant emptiness behind it as if it's trying to run away from reality. Like we all are in some way. I've always wondered what used to be in that spot behind the nameless sign. Was it a restaurant or a school? What happened to the building? Did it close down? Did it burn?

Does anyone else care that it's gone?

My mom would. She cares about everything. She even names inanimate objects and talks to them as if they have hearts and cells. One time she hit a baby bunny with her car, and I swear she didn't stop crying for two days.

She doesn't know I'm here standing in front of my past that's dressed up in a white house with blue shutters and a welcome mat that says "Hi, I'm Mat."

My birth father is on the other side of that ugly blue door, and I have no idea what that means to me. If I'm going to fill that space behind my own abandoned sign or if he's going to take one look at me and decide to build somewhere else. I reach in my jacket pocket for the letter he sent. The corners are bent, and I'm not sure if it's from me reading it so many times or maybe because he crunched it in his hand after he wrote it, contemplating whether or not to send it. I glance down at his handwriting. It's loopy but firm. Is he going to be the same way? The letter's short, only a few sentences about how he wants to meet me, and how he had no idea his daughter lived so close.

I wonder if we look alike. I have dimples in my chin and my cheeks—could that be from him? Does he have dark hair like mine that's always half-curly and half-straight when I do nothing to it? Does he have blue eyes that have flecks of brown like mine?

My breath sounds like a windstorm, and my palms are clammy than when I had a fever last month. Maybe I'm getting sick? No, that's not it.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

I knock on the door, once, twice.

It flies open like he was waiting for me. Instead of my birth father, though, I'm greeted by two men. One has longish black locks, and the other is shorter,

with pale, almost-yellow skin and hair to match. They are the perfect contrast to each other. My ... dads?

“Is that her?” the long-haired guy asks the other.

The blond looks at him as if he’s nuts, and then turns back to me. “Caden?”

I nod and lick my lips a few times because I can tell they’re getting chapped. Confusion sweeps through my brain. Too much is happening at once. I don’t know where to focus my eyes—if I should be glancing at the blond guy or the long-haired one. Will one of them be hurt if I don’t look at him? Maybe they’re nervous, too.

The long-haired guy leans over and lifts me up in a huge hug. I let out an audible “oof,” as he says, “We’re so glad you’re here.”

Partner, definitely his partner.

I pat him on the back a few times to see if he will release me. No such luck. A hundred minutes later he finally sets me down. I take a deep breath in.

The blond takes a similar breath in, too. Yoga breath, I recognize, in the nose and out the nose. I’ve been doing the same thing since he opened the door, trying not to pass out.

“I’m Sam,” the blond says, “your ... uh ...” He pauses to look at his partner for help, maybe?

“Your father,” his partner finishes for him, with a friendly nudge in the side.

Sam gives me a nervous smile. “Yeah, dad ... or, yeah.” He takes another yoga breath. “This is Mason, my husband.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, a little breathless, my voice sounding like I have rocks tumbling in my vocal chords. I clear my throat.

Mason opens the door wider and grabs my arm gently. “Come in, come in. We made lasagna, but it’s not just regular lasagna; it’s made with gluten-free noodles and eggplant and chocolate sauce,” he says in an excited tone.

Did I hear him right? “I’m sorry, chocolate sauce?”

Sam starts laughing. “He’s kidding.”

“No, I’m not. It’s a mole sauce,” he says seriously, like *how dare we doubt him!*

Sam’s smile disappears, and he and I shoot confused glances at each other. We both turn away quickly as if looking at each other breaks some sort of first-

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