

Jacqueline Cordes

Here

My eyes snapped open and I sat up to find that I was in a dark alley with black metal walls that seemed to stretch fifty feet into the sky. It was daytime but very little light could find its way down to me. *Where am I?* I thought as I stood up from the cold metal ground. A draft of wind blew through the alley, making me shiver. The walls looked exactly the same in both directions, and were curved so that I couldn't see where they ended. Not knowing what else to do, I picked a direction and began to walk. I walked for several minutes before I came to a dead end with a small, cabin-like house, which looked completely out of place against the black metal background. A dim light shined from inside the window, appearing warm and inviting. I approached the door and noticed that it was slightly ajar. I knocked and it opened a bit. To my surprise there were about ten little girls running around, perhaps six or so years of age. The inside of the house had several bunk beds and belongings everywhere. The girls were chatting loudly, and some were running from room to room, but I didn't see any adults. I shouted "Hello?" to no response and finally caught the attention of one of the girls and asked, "Hi, are there any adults here?"

The girl looked up at me and giggled as she said, "No," then ran off.

Losing patience, I walked through the doorway and called out, "Um, can someone please tell me where I am?" but they all seemed to be too distracted to hear me.

Seeing that this wasn't going anywhere, I was about to leave when one of the girls stopped running and said to me, "Someone doesn't like you."

Her comment startled me, and I was quiet for a moment before I said, “Who? I don’t even know anyone here!”

The girl then shouted, “It’s her!” and pointed to an empty bunk bed that had the name “Mackenzie” on it.

“I don’t know anyone named Mackenzie,” I said. “You must be thinking of someone else.” I went out the door, closing it quietly behind me and saw that there was a fork in the alley ahead. I decided to see what was at the other end of the path I’d taken before, and began walking back through the long stretch of the metal alleyway.

At least twenty minutes later, the alley opened up to a blindingly bright grass area in front of a building labeled “RESTAURANT.” There were hedges all the way around and a fountain in the middle of the courtyard. I walked across the grass and opened the front door of the restaurant—to my relief there were several people there, sitting at round tables with fancy white tablecloths and several waiters walking around briskly. I walked up to a woman at the front desk and said, “Can you please tell me where I am?”

She looked at me and answered, “You’re Here.” She then smiled a flat smile and replied, “Please wait to be seated, a server will be with you shortly.”

I was taken aback by her answer and stood there for a few moments in silence before a waiter approached and gestured for me to follow him. I quickly caught up to him and asked, “Excuse me, but where am I right now?”

He turned back to me and gave me the same calm, closed-mouth smile that the woman at the front had. “Didn’t you see the sign?” he replied. “You’re in the Restaurant.”

“No, but where...”

“You’re Here. This will be your table,” he said, and left. I sat down at the table he’d led me to, which already had two men and one woman seated there. All three of them sat quietly eating, and soon the waiter came over and placed the same thing in front of me that everyone else had: an oblong yellow cake about seven or so inches in length in a small casserole dish. On the cake there was a message in cursive, made of light blue frosting that said, “*Don’t lie.*”

Well, I thought, that’s definitely not going to happen at this table. The silence is deafening.

I felt my pockets and realized they were empty, “I’m sorry, I don’t have any money.”

“Money has no meaning Here,” the waiter replied. He was standing there, smiling with the same smile and waiting patiently. Suddenly realizing that I was starving, I picked up my fork in silence and scooped some cake from the dish and ate it. It wasn’t terrible, but it tasted bland and was a bit dry.

I continued to eat in silence and the man to my left suddenly looked up at the waiter and asked, “May I please have some water?” I then realized how thirsty I was myself.

The waiter smiled and replied, “Of course. Once you finish the cake.”

I felt my heartbeat quicken, and we all continued to eat in silence. After a few minutes, the man to my left finished, and the waiter left briefly and returned with a large pitcher of water and a glass, which he filled up and gave to the man, who drank it quickly.

I decided to try to finish my cake too, and lifted it out of the dish with my hands—it stayed intact. I then bit into it like a sandwich, but it suddenly became chewy and spongy, so much so that I couldn’t bite through it. Startled, I spit it out, stood up, and quickly left the restaurant.

The sun was beginning to set, and while walking back across the grass area, I looked ahead and saw that there were two different paths that curved away from each other. This time I took the left path. Another twenty minutes. After a final turn around a bend of the alley, I found that I was at the cabin again. I then heard loud crying from inside and walked quickly over to the door, flinging it open to see one of the girls standing there with tears streaming down her face. The other girls were nowhere to be seen. I got down on my knees, holding her shoulders. “What happened?” I asked.

The girl replied in between sobs, “She got mad.”

“Who?” I asked, my panic rising. “Who got mad?”

The girl sobbed louder and then turned away from me and walked into the other room. I quickly peeked into the other rooms in the cabin but no one else was there. It was then that it really hit me that I really needed to get out of this place. No matter what.

I ran back through the alley, back toward the grass area. I remembered that the hedges weren't that tall, and I figured that I could climb over them and escape. When I arrived at the clearing with the restaurant, it was dusk. No one else was outside, and I walked up to one of the hedges and began scrambling up it. It was more difficult than I expected, and although the sharp branches cut my hands, the hedge was stiff enough that I was able to pull myself over. I stumbled as I landed on the other side of the hedge, brushed off dust as I stood up, and looked out. A seemingly endless stretch of dead brush and weeds lay ahead of me. I began to walk.

A long time passed, but I wasn't sure how long. Maybe thirty minutes, maybe an hour. Suddenly, I saw a figure in front of me. It was a person, and they were walking toward me. I drew a sharp breath in, before making out that it was a boy.

As he approached, it was hard to see him well in the darkness but I could tell he looked exhausted. He then said, breathlessly, “You’re trying to escape like me. Trust me, there’s nothing out there.”

“...nothing?” I felt the weight of hopelessness pull down in my chest.

The boy was still breathing hard. “I started walking at the crack of dawn today, hoping to find anything out there. But there’s nothing.”

I was silent. Then I asked, “How long have you been here?”

“About a week I think.” The boy continued, “Let me guess, you don’t have any memory of your past life?”

When he said those words, for the first time I realized that I didn’t remember anything at all prior to waking up. I didn’t even know what my own name was. *I was hoping that this was just a dream*, I thought. *Even though I know it’s not.*

The boy added, “You have no idea how nice it is to hear another voice for once. Everyone else is too afraid to talk.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, you’re the first normal person I’ve met here,” I said. Then I remembered the question that I really wanted answered.

“Who’s Mackenzie?” I asked suddenly.

“I’ve never met her, but I have a feeling she’s the kind of person you don’t want to meet. Have you seen that creepy cake yet?”

“Yeah, what was that about?”

“All I know is that some people take the warning seriously, and some don’t. The ones who do are the only ones still here.”

I said desperately, “Well, what’s the plan?”

The boy slowly shook his head. “I even asked the waiters how to get out. They all just say that it doesn’t matter where we were or where we want to be, we’re all Here now.”