

NORTH
TEXAS
REVIEW

2019

WHATEVER YOU THINK

YOU NEED

by Patrick Lawrenson

MONDAY

My sister, Sarah, hums a song from somewhere above. The tune fades in and out like the tire she swings from. I'll drop my focus from the book in my lap for a few seconds, I can make out the gentle crack of the taut rope -- invariably, it drowns under Sarah's warbly soundscape.

"Tell me a story, Archie."

I flash a glance from my cross-legged perch at the base of the tree. Sarah doesn't look at me from her spot atop the worn rubber tire swing. Her eyes are closed, and her head rests atop two folded arms as she rocks back and forth. The picture of grace. I ignore her request.

"Archie."

Softer and sweeter this time. It would take a brother to hear how practiced it is. I almost give in and glance up when a merciful ant catches my eye from the corner of Greece: Old and New in my lap. The third of six books about ancient Europe I currently have checked out from the Richwood High library since the semester began. I am sure they are due sometime.

Maybe the ant knows. The little, reddish thing rests at the top corner of the right-hand page. I flick it off with my forefinger, watch her unfold wings in a blur and fly away, feel my satisfaction lift and die instead.

"Archibald."

That gets my attention and a scowl. It deepens when I see Sarah giggling, her eyes still shut in spite of unconfined mirth. I admit defeat.

"Why would a pre-med student be interested in

stories?" I say, closing the book between two fingers as I lean back into the tree.

My tree strides away from the back entrance to the school library, where I've worked as a shelf-stacker for the last three summers. Dad wanted me to work. To make a living. To provide. Now that he was gone, states away with some coworker, I feel almost as rich as those sentiments.

This oak's inset base is my favorite spot to roost after checking out a book. At the correct angle, the large roots serve as decent armrests, and sometimes it reminds me of childhood nights reading picture books with my mother in her blueberry recliner. I would sit in her lap, Sarah on the floor picking away at holes in the chair's fabric, as she read aloud to us both.

Sarah's piercing green eyes are on me now.

"What is that, the third book about Ancient Greece this year?" she snorts. "How much more is there to learn about?"

"Plenty." I insist, wearily. My turn to close my eyes.

"I'll rephrase that." Sarah persists. "How much more can you learn from reading books? Experience is the best teacher."

Reopened. I squint at Sarah accusingly.

"Last week you said failure was the best teacher."

"Failure is experience, man," Sarah said, rolling her eyes back while waving her arm out, an invisible blunt between two fingers in her left hand. These little playlets are some of Sarah's favorite. "I'm in college" past-times. Even though we know she is as

squeaky clean as any of us, she decided at some point she is right about experience, though. I've

known it for a while. Our small town, buried in the barren heart of Kansas, no longer seems to fit me. Every time the bus picks me up for another day at school, I spend the next hour staring out the window watching the blurring rows of corn. As they billow by, I try to imagine they are fields of golden wheat, ends tickling my fingers as I approach the sea. The bus always pulls up in a cloud of dirt, just in time for class.

"Don't you have things to do?" I say. Sarah will be heading off to TCU in a week or so. Full-ride. Mom and I are very proud. "I like, a lot of things? All-day, elsewhere kinds of things?"

Sarah rocks forward far enough to kick up some dust into my face.

"You wish."

I wipe the cover clean, thumb the book open again. Scan for a way to make her leave.

"Here's a story about medicine for our medical genius," I say. Sarah smirks and flips her hair over her shoulder for show. "A slave dropped and broke his master's favorite cup in the street one morning. When he sat down to put it back together, someone saw him and asked, 'Why are you wasting your time? Not even Aesclepius of Epidaurus could make it whole again.'"

"How long is this story?"

"Shut up," I say, continuing. "So the slave brought the broken pieces to the Epidaurean temple, to the god of healing. When he got there, opened the bag and took out the cup, he saw that it was whole again. The master called it a miracle."

"The dude clearly just glued it back together," Sarah says with a wave and a dry tone. "A story about an inattentive slave-owner. Fun."

She leans back, rocks the tire swing, and leaps to the ground in one motion. Sarah flips the curls of black hair off her face and glances back at me.

"You have to outgrow fables someday, Archie," Sarah says. "Live a little. Experience life. Stop reading about it."

Hiszen as her footsteps fade away.

TUESDAY

I arrive first for the EF Tours Orientation meeting after school lets out. The room is empty, so I slip into a seat in the back row and set my black jansport book bag on the desk in front of me, resting my head on it while I wait, wondering again if I'm making the

right decision.

I'm still not sure that putting my name into the drawing for this EF Tours thing was a decision. More like an impulse. Our counselor, Mrs. Robinson, had offered six randomly selected Honors Society students an all-expenses-paid educational tour of Greece. When she drew my name, I felt a strange desire to float.

I rode that elation for a month. Then Sarah gave us her graduation date. This weekend. Right when I take off for Greece.

The five other winners of the drawing trickle into the room over the next few minutes. Two senior girls I don't know. Some guy I recognize. And Jodie Engelen and Sam, her ex-boyfriend. My heart skips a beat. Sam hasn't dropped out of this thing? Word has it their breakup wasn't exactly smooth. They sit next to each other. I fidget with my pen.

The meeting begins when Mrs. Robinson enters.

"I want to congratulate you all again," she begins, passing out brochures to Senior Girl One in the front row. "Many of your peers signed up for this trip, and you're the lucky few winners for this incredible experience."

The brochures wind their way to Sam and Jodie. His hand brushes hers before she reaches behind her to hand the final one to me. I forget how to move my hands because her blue eyes are boring into mine, waiting. Her eyebrows twist in a grin, and she flips the flyer at me like a fish. My daze lifts and I try to grin back, lowering my head and snatching the paper away. Someone is snickering, but I don't look up to see who. Instead, I study the flyer.

EF Tours: A New Perspective On The World! Lower down, a list of cities and countries. Above them all, in bold: A Grecian Odyssey.

I open the brochure to devour the itinerary again. Mrs. Robinson's voice is somewhere else, up front, mixing with click-clacks of the chalkboard and scratches of pencils around me.

I blame buzzing thoughts when I break my six-year streak of not-stepping on sidewalk cracks as I walk home from the bus stop.

I might make a new game out of avoiding the sidewalk grass shoots. The weeds emerge through random slivers lining concrete paths of my neighborhood. Nature reclaiming things here most of the residents are not done with yet.

I've not felt that ownership in some time. My neighborhood is ordinary, trucked off the main road

we take to school. Our lawns are sparse and have been since the first big move-off a few years ago. The one that my father hitched a ride out of town on.

The neighborhood is a cluster of memories made without him. Playing pretend in the creek. Soccer with Sarah in our front yard, both of us silently watching for his maroon sedan to appear from around the corner. His awlability was always “up in the air” after the divorce, and for a few years that spontaneity made him a mythical figure to Sarah and I, like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, an arrival to believe in until you stop believing.

Ours is a single-story red brick building at the end of the street. I unlock the front door, and when the creaking subsides, I hear the familiar low churn of the washing machine. I walk past my mom, pulling suitcases down from the small closet in the hallway, on my way to my room.

Wait.

Back, on a dime, to mom.

“Suitcases?” I ask. Mom doesn’t respond right away. She shuffles past me back out to the den, toward the master bedroom. I follow.

“Oh, we had the most terrible news this morning.” Mom says, getting the largest suitcase onto the bed with a toss. She sighs and turns back to me, smoothing her pants. “Your father called.”

“My father called?” I say.

“Mhm. He was in an accident, sweetie,” she says. Her eyes are narrowed with concern. Empathy. She is the sweetest. “Nothing life-threatening, but he can’t go home for a few weeks. I said we all would go up to Minnesota to take care of him, at least until school begins. We’re leaving on Saturday. It will be fun! Like a little vacation.”

My mind is full of bees. The ticket envelope in my pocket feels heavy.

“I don’t know, mom,” I say, unable to meet her gaze. “I have things to do next week.”

She chuffs at that, rolling her eyes and waving me off.

“I know your schedule, and you certainly do not,” Mom says. “Your library job ended last week, and all you have left before senior year is to round up all of those books you’ve failed to return. You’ll have plenty of time to do that when we get back.”

“Besides, it’s about time you saw your father again, don’t you think?”

I really, really don’t. Mom must have me confused with Sarah. They were always closer, even if just slightly. Every few months I’ll hear her in the next room on the phone, offering obligatory life

updates to him for half an hour. Sarah never seemed to hold onto his absence like I have. But then, Sarah never seems to dwell on much anyway.

I offer a shrug to my mom and halfing her before departing for my bedroom. I pull out my laptop and pull up some pictures. Golden columns riding atop a white counter-top hill, their shadows a cape draped over much of the flickering streets beyond. Athens at night.

WEDNESDAY

I rarely have the house to myself at night — the plight of a high schooler.

So, when my parents remind me they are due at a church potluck, and Sarah would be visiting with some old high school friends, I quickly assure them I am swamped as well. The three hours of solitude are worth the latest fb. I get through more of Greece: Old and New and almost complete an application to the University of Iowa when I see a text from Jodie.

Not Jodie — José from History Club saying they miss me at meetings — but the hope sparks a half-hour of scrolls through some of my old Facebook posts she had liked.

The arrival of the golden child finally interrupts my golden evening. My older sister, the flawed hero of her own story, plunges through the front door, tosses her keys on the coffee table and sinks into the couch next to me. Her grin is stupid, and she flicks my ear where I hate it.

Sarah stares at me.

“What do you want?” I grumble.

“You don’t want to see dad,” she says, clearly but with a smug directness that must come from liquid courage.

“Of course I do.”

“Bullshit,” she says, slapping the couch’s armrest for emphasis. “You’d rather be sitting here, messaging that girl on your laptop screen than at the most important moment of my life so far.”

Shit. I forgot to close out of a freshman year picture of Jodie and me, side-by-side with the rest of the inaugural members of History Club. Bars burning. I slam the laptop shut and glowbar at my smoking sister, trying to reclaim some ground with indignation. I don’t even have Jodie’s number, anyway.

“It’s not about her — really?” I exclaim at Sarah’s fake laugh outburst. “I have that Greece trip next week. I really need to go to get out. And Dad just doesn’t seem worth it.”

Sarah goes silent at that. Still grins, though.

“I mean, not like, his life or anything,” I say, starting off to the side. I always have a hard time keeping eye contact when trying to find the right words. Truths require the right words. “The effort, I guess. He gave, like, the minimal amount to me — to us. Growing up.”

“So we should give the minimal amount of care back?”

“I mean, maybe,” I say. “How many times has mom complained about his late child support payments?”

“Not as much as she used to,” Sarah says.

But she did, for a few years, and he still never visits. Rarely calls. For months on end, we have little to no idea what’s going on in his life. Sometimes I stop and think about a minute that just passed, and how, for all I know, it might have been the moment my father died. And how, had I not passed to think about it, that minute would feel no different than the next. “These are only times I miss him as profoundly as an amputee might miss a limb.

“I don’t get why she’s so loyal to someone like that,” I say.

Sarah’s eyes roll back.

“Someone like that?” Sarah retorts. “The fuck, Archie. For someone who lives in faraway places in his head you sure think you’re the only one who sees things for what they are.”

“I just think,” I continue, voice rising slightly.

“Mom should say no to him more often. Give him some of the cold shoulders we’ve had to live through.”

“You know she isn’t like that, Archie,” Sarah says in the gentle tone she and my mom use with my nickname.

“She should be,” I say.

“Arch, you can’t make people act the way you need them to,” Sarah says, exasperated. “Even the ones you love. And if you love mom, you’ll be helpful this weekend.”

I squirm as she kisses the top of my head, and as I feign shaking it out of my hair, she hops off the couch, wanders back into the kitchen for a snack.

THURSDAY

Sarah mentions enough friends in the first few bites of dinner that I can tell her mind is already in Fort Worth, running down the list of people to say goodbye to this weekend.

Mom runs through our travel plan repeatedly, though she makes sure to inquire after each friend

Sarah mentions. Here and not, as always. I smile on the fringes of the conversation, stripping the limbs off my broccoli, thinking of Greece.

I eat quickly and hurry back to my room to pack.

The EF Tours ticket is on my desk. I haven’t summoned enough will to dispose of it yet. I sigh as I slump in my chair, considering the days ahead. I’m not sure what my mom thinks she needs out of the weekend, but it’s not me. Who does, anymore?

What I need is this excursion overseas. Far from here, even for a little while, far enough from weed-ridden sidewalks in this stale town that I can breathe for the first time, breathe and live.

I need to be sure, so I pick up the phone. It takes a minute to find the number, and when I do, I stare at it for a moment. I finally hit the call button and listen to what feels like forty dial tones.

“Archie.”

The voice is hoarse but familiar.

“Hey dad,” I say. I keep my voice low enough that mom and Sarah won’t hear from the next room.

“Did I wake you up?”

“I mean, it’s night, so no,” my father says. That’s it.

“Ah, sorry,” I say. “Just calling to see how you’re doing. I hadn’t heard what happened in the accident. Mom didn’t tell me.”

“Wasn’t much to tell,” dad says, his voice fading out a bit as if he was holding it at arm’s length. As far as I know, he’s in a hospital bed, so I’m unsure what he could be doing. But then his voice returns to full volume. “Moron driver didn’t see my bike. Thought that’s what headlights were for.”

I hear another voice rising in the background. An Australian accent. Chiky.

“Listen, I gotta go,” dad says. The line clicks dead.

I slip under the covers and fall asleep. In my dreams, I sink.

FRIDAY

By the time I wake up, my mother is up early in a mood that sounds like eggs crackling on a hot skillet. I recognize the warm scent of maple syrup from my bed. Comfortable senses until I open my eyes to the face of the airline ticket on my nightstand.

I shake my head, roll out and get dressed, running through new justifications. The simple things matter to my mom, like this excellent breakfast and the times we spend together, even briefly. Breakfast is what ordinary families have together. So are trips.

I feel resigned to the façade despite the dial tone echoing in my memory from the night before.

I throw on an old grey hoodie I like to wear on flights or long road trips, belt up my jeans, lace up sneakers. I grab the ticket, toss it into the trash can, watch it long after it floats to a rest.

SATURDAY

A brightness shines off my mom and sister through airport security. Although we're on different flights, I opt to linger with them at their terminal while they wait to board.

My sister is wrapped up in conversation with a stranger. A red and black pea coat she will use as a flight pillow rests on her lap.

"No, no, I bet they'll hand out peanuts this time ... I just have a good feeling. Never know when

it could be our lucky day. Unless it's honey-roasted ... oh, sure that's unlucky, sure it is ..."

My mother leans in and whispers through a grin. "She's always so good at social butterflying."

"Can't hear you through my cringes," I quip. Mom smiles devilishly. I fidget with my suitcase handle.

They call their boarding group, and I choose to follow them through to the end of the line as if I might not see them again for a long time. For all I know, I might not. Dad hadn't.

I turn to them both for customary hugs, hoping they don't notice how my left hand trembles slightly, or how my heart thumps in my chest. Mom kisses me on the cheek, walks up the ramp. Sarah turns for a hug, but then our eyes meet, and she sees it.

Eyebrows furrow, shoulders slump and my sister exhales in revelation.

"Ah, you're fucking doing it!"

Less accusation than resignation, her arms falling pointedly back down to her sides. I follow her gaze to my front pocket, where the ticket to Greece has begun to stick out.

I made sure to lag behind as we walked up to the TSA agent at security, even ran into some good fortune when Sarah yanked my mother back by the belt she forgot to remove. That gave me a few extra seconds to put the ticket away while they laughed with one another and the TSA ward person at the scene.

Sarah's eyes rise to meet mine like green flares. The shadow of a smile on her face is the worst, the rueful worst.

"Sarah, I—"

"Don't," she says, raising a hand. "I don't need to hear it. I can't make your choices for you, no matter how fucking disappointing they are."

"I'm looking out for myself like dad always wanted." I say. The words feel small leaving my mouth.

Sarah just nods. "You certainly are."

She pauses, and the silence is heavy between us. "I'm sorry," say. "I need to go."

She nods at the ground.

"Well, I hope you find whatever you think you need. See you around."

She spins on a heel and marches up the ramp without waiting for my goodbye.

SUNDAY

The day is serene, and the clouds are cumulus, an expanse of pockmarked blue boats sailing on a sea of pale wheat. From my window seat, I swear the sunlight glinting off the wingtip shines brighter as we land.

I feel Jose and Jodie lean over my shoulder to share the view. When cell service returns my backpack buzzes from tarmac to taxi cab.

