

Doctorow, Cory

Drápela, Martin (editor)

#10

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#10

1 The car that had plowed into Wei-Dong's father's car was driven
by a very exasperated, very tired British man, fat and bald, with two
angry kids in the back seat and an angry wife in the front seat.
He was steadily, quietly cursing in British, which was a lot like
5 cursing in American, but with a lot more "bloodies" in it. He paced
the sidewalk beside the wrecked Huawei, his wife calling at him
from inside the car to get back in the bloody car, Ronald, but Ronald
wasn't having any of it.

Wei-Dong sat on the narrow strip of grass between the road and
10 the sidewalk, dazed in the noon sun, waiting for his vision
to stop swimming. Benny sat next to him, holding a wad of kleenex
to staunch the bleeding from his broken nose, which he'd bounced
off of the dashboard. Wei-Dong brought his hands up to his forehead
to finger the lump there again. His hands smelled of new plastic,
15 the smell of the airbag that he'd had to punch his way out of.

The fat man crouched next to him. "Christ, son, you look like you've
been to the wars. But you'll be all right, right? Could have been
much worse."

"Sir," Benny Rosenbaum said, in a quiet voice muffled by the kleenex.

20 "Please leave us alone now. When the police come, we can all talk,
all right?"

"'Course, ,course." His kids were screaming now, hollering
from the back seat about getting to Disneyland, when were
they getting to Disneyland? "Shut it, you monsters," he roared.

25 The sound made Wei-Dong flinch back. He wobbled to his feet.

"Sit down, Leonard," his father said. "You shouldn't have gotten
out of the car, and you certainly shouldn't be walking around
now. You could have a concussion or a spinal injury. Sit down,"
he repeated, but Wei-Dong needed to get off the grass, needed to walk
30 off the sick feeling in his stomach.

Uh-oh. He barely made it to the curb, hands braced on the crumpled,
flaking rear section of the Huawei, before he started to barf,
a geyser of used food that shot straight out of his guts and flew all
over the wreck of the car. A moment later, his father's hands were
35 on his shoulders, steadying him. Angrily, he shook them off.

There were sirens coming now, and the fat man was talking intensely
to old Benny, though it was quiet enough that Wei-Dong could
only make out a few words -- insurance, fault, vacation -- all
in a wheedling tone. His father kept trying to get a word in,
40 but the guy was talking over him. Wei-Dong could have told him

that this wasn't a good strategy. Nothing was surer to make Volcano Benny blow. And here it came.

"Shut your mouth for a second, all right? Just SHUT IT."

The shout was so loud that even the kids in the back seat went
45 silent.

"YOU HIT US, you goddamned idiot! We're not going to go halves on the damage. We're not going to settle this for cash. I don't care if you're jetlagged, I don't care if you didn't buy the extra insurance on your rental car, I don't care if this will ruin your
50 vacation. You could have killed us, you understand that, moron?"

The man held up his hands and cringed behind them. "You were parked in the middle of the road, mate," he said, a note of pleading in his voice.

Everyone was watching them, the kids and the guy's wife,
55 the rubberneckers who slowed down to see the accident. The two men were totally focused on each other.

In other words, no one was watching Wei-Dong.

He thought about the sound his earwig made, crunching under his father's steel-toed shoe, heard the sirens getting closer, and...

60 He...

Left.

He sidled away toward the shrubs that surrounded a mini-mall and gas-station, nonchalant, clutching his school-bag, like he was just getting his bearings, but he was headed toward a gap there, a narrow
65 one that he just barely managed to squeeze through. He popped through into the parking lot around the mini-mall, filled with stores selling \$3 t-shirts and snow-globes and large bottles of filtered water. On this side of the shrubs, the world was normal and busy, filled with tourists on their way to or from Disneyland.

70 He picked up his pace, keeping his face turned away from the stores and the CCTV cameras outside of them. He felt in his pocket, felt the few dollars there. He had to get away, far away, fast, if he was going to get away at all.

And there was his salvation, the tourist bus that rolled through
75 the streets of the Anaheim Resort District, shuttling people from hotels to restaurants to the parks, crowded with sugared-up kids and conventioners with badges hanging around their necks, and it was trundling to the stop just a few yards away. He broke into a run, stumbled from the pain that seared through his head like
80 a lightning bolt, then settled for walking as quickly as he could. The sirens were very, very loud now, right there on the other side of the shrubs, and he was almost at the bus and there was his father's voice, calling his name and there was the bus and --

-- his foot came down on the bottom step, his back foot came up
85 to join it, and the impatient driver closed the doors behind him and
released the air-brake with a huge sigh and the bus lurched forward.
"Wei-Dong Rosenbaum," he whispered to himself, "you've just escaped
a parental kidnapping to a military school, what are you going
to do now?" He grinned. "I'm going to Disneyland!"

90 The bus trundled down Katella, heading for the bus-entrance, and
then it disgorged its load of frenetic tourists. Wei-Dong mingled
with them, invisible in the mass of humanity skipping past the huge,
primary-colored traffic pylons. He was on autopilot, remained
on autopilot as he unslung his school-bag to let the bored security
95 goon paw through it.

He'd had a Disneyland annual pass since he was old enough to ride
the bus. All the kids he knew had them too -- it beat going
to the mall after school, and even though it got boring after
a while, he could think of no better place to disappear into while
100 thinking through his next steps.

He walked down Main Street, heading for the little pink castle
at the end of the road. He knew that there were secluded benches
on the walkways around the castle, places where he could sit down and
think for a moment. His head felt like it was full of candy floss.

105 First thing he did after sitting down was check his phone. The ringer
had been off -- school rules -- but he'd felt it vibrating
continuously in his pocket. Fifteen missed calls from his father.
He dialled up his voicemail and listened to his dad rant about coming
back right now and all the dire things that would happen to him if
110 he didn't.

"Kid, whatever you think you're doing, you're wrong about it. You're
going to come home eventually. The sooner you call me back, the less
trouble we're going to have. And the longer you wait -- you listen
to this, Leonard -- the longer you wait, the worse it's going to be.
115 There are worse things than boarding school, kid. Much, much worse."
He stared vacantly at the sky, listening to this, and then he dropped
the phone as though he'd been scorched by it.

It had a GPS in it. They were always using phones to find runaways and
bad guys and lost hikers. He picked the phone up off the pavement and
120 slid the back out and removed the battery, then put it in his jacket
pocket, returning the phone to his jeans. He wasn't much
of a fugitive.

The police had been on the way to the accident when he left. They'd
arrived minutes later. The old man had decided that he'd run away,
125 so he'd be telling the cops that. He was a minor, and truant, and
he'd been in a car accident, and hell, face it, his family was

rich. That meant that the police would pay attention to his dad, which meant that they'd be doing everything they could to locate him. If they hadn't yet figured out where his phone was, they'd know soon enough -- they'd run the logs and find the call from Disneyland to his voicemail.

He started moving, shoving his way through the crowds, heading back up Main Street. He ducked around behind a barbershop quartet and realized that he was standing in front of an ATM. They'd be shutting down his card any second, too -- or, if they were smart, they'd leave the card live and use it to track him. He needed cash. He waited while a pair of German tourists fumbled with the machine and then jammed his card into it and withdrew \$500, the most the machine would dispense. He hit it again for another \$500, self-conscious now of the inch-thick wad of twenties in his hand. He tried for a third withdrawal, but the machine told him he'd gone to his daily limit. He didn't think he had much more than \$1,000 in the bank, anyway -- that was several years' worth of birthday money, plus a little from his summer job working at a Chinese PC repair shop at a mini-mall in Irvine.

He folded the wad and stuck it in his pocket and headed out of the park, not bothering with the hand-stamp. He started to head for the street, but then he turned on his heel and headed toward

150 the Downtown Disney shopping complex and the hotels that attached
to it. There were cheap tour-buses that went from there up to LA,
down to San Diego, to all the airports. There was no easier, cheaper
way to get far from here.

The lobby of the Grand Californian Hotel soared to unimaginable
155 heights, giant beams criss-crossing through the cavernous space. Wei-
Dong had always liked this place. It always seemed so rendered, like
an imaginary place, with the intricate marble inlays on the floor,
the ten-foot-high stained-glass panels set into the sliding doors,
the embroidered upholstery on the sofas. Now, though, he just wanted
160 to get through it and onto a bus to --

Where?

Anywhere.

He didn't know what he was going to do next, but one thing he did
know, he wasn't going to be sent away to some school for screwups,
165 kicked off the Internet, kicked off the games. His father wouldn't
have allowed anyone to do this to him, no matter what problems he was
having. The old man would never let himself be pushed around and
shaken up like this.

His mother would worry -- but she always worried, didn't she?

170 He'd send her email once he got somewhere, an email every day,
let her know that he was OK. She was good to him. Hell, the old

man was good to him, come to that. Mostly. But he was seventeen now, he wasn't a kid, he wasn't a broken toy to be shipped back to the manufacturer.

175 The man behind the concierge desk didn't bat an eye when Wei-Dong asked for the schedule for the airport shuttles, just handed it over. Wei-Dong sat down in the darkest corner by the stone fireplace, the most inconspicuous place in the whole hotel. He was starting to get paranoid now, he could recognize the feeling, but
180 it didn't help soothe him as he jumped and stared at every Disney cop who strolled through the lobby, doubtless he was looking as guilty as a mass-murderer.

The next bus was headed for LAX, and the one after, for the Santa Monica airport. Wei-Dong decided that LAX was the right place to go.

185 Not so he could get on a plane -- if his dad had called the cops, he was sure they'd have some kind of trace on at the ticket-sales windows. He didn't know exactly how that worked, but he understood how bottlenecks worked, thanks to gaming. Right now, he could be anywhere in LA, which meant that they'd have to devote a gigantic
190 amount of effort in order to find him. But if he tried to leave by airplane, there'd be a much smaller number of places they'd have to check to catch him -- the airline counters at four or five airports in town -- and that was a lot more practical.

But LAX also had cheap buses to everywhere in LA, buses that went
195 to every hotel and neighborhood. It would take a long time, sure --
an hour and a half from Disneyland to LAX, another hour or two to get
back to LA, but that was fine. He needed time -- time to figure out
what he was going to do next.

Because when he was totally honest with himself, he had to admit
200 that he had no freaking idea.