

Bounce

M C Neuffer

Today was the worst three months of my life. It began naked and alone. I've become accustomed to arriving this way, but after suffering for weeks with a severely burned arm, a fever, and a badly sprained ankle, I am glad to be back home in the real, in Cambridge, Maryland. Back on my job as a diesel mechanic and happy my injuries don't travel with me. Back home in the same clothes, at the same instant I left.

My current, real-world haunt is on the eastern shore of southern Chesapeake Bay. I picked this area for the ease of finding food year-round in the other place. No large predators--at least not aggressive ones. Wolves, if they exist, haven't made their way this far east. The bears are shy unless you trip over one or get too close to a momma's den or her cubs.

This bouncing has been going on for the last three years, four months, and seventeen days. The stays in the other place are getting longer and longer. There, like here, nothing changes from visit to visit. I'd go crazy if I had to restart each time I was jerked there. When it happens, I know I'm still in Maryland, where Cambridge should be, because the geography is the same. In the other place, after a bounce, the only difference is that there are no people, no roads, no buildings. Nothing to indicate humans have been there. Nothing except my camp,

such as it is. Anyone who longs for a new, pristine world is nuts. I no longer think I'm crazy.

When in civilization, I lead a mundane life. No one keeps track of me except my boss. He only cares I show up for work and do the job. Before all this started, I was the poster boy for going out with the guys, loudly tipping back more than a few beers, and joining them in casual tokes. I tried the live-in girlfriend bit, but the first two tired of my boys dropping by at all hours, so they ended those experiments in cohabitation. At twenty-six, I felt I had plenty of time before age tapped my brakes, slowing me for the exit to a settled life. Now, time is a weird thing. I come back exactly as I was when I left. I don't age while I'm gone.

Before my first trip, I was living in Massachusetts. The shift was only a few minutes, but it shook me and knocked out all my support pins. The next time, I spent three wet days without fire until lightning struck. I salvaged a burning stick. That night was like living at the Ritz: hot fire, light in the darkness. I could see my roasted meal of worms and bugs-on-a-stick. That was long before I pulled up stakes and moved south.

Frankly, I don't know if I'm projected to the extreme past, some post-human far future, or a parallel universe. There's been no evidence to support any of those. The sun, moon, and night sky appear the same in both places. I've memorized the constellations. The only thing I do know as certain is the land. It doesn't change between here and there except for the absence

of human impacts like building excavations, quay walls, or cuts through hills for highways. When you're scraping hides for clothes, you have a lot of time to think. If I could take a simple knife with me, life would be so much easier there.

Two years further on

Eyes follow me everywhere I go. Some are curious, some fearful. Others wonder how I taste. Except for the occasional crow, none are brave enough to enter my camp. By study and necessity, I've learned which local plants are edible and the animals' natural habits in this area. Deer abound, but catching them is impossible, so I wait for them to step into my snares. Placed along the game trails, those need frequent checking. Take too long, and my catch will gnaw through their hardened leather thongs.

Deadfalls and snares work reasonably well for smaller mammals. Roast rat isn't too bad. Along the coast, my diet is mostly seafood. Crabs, clams, fish. Cattail and dandelion roots provide starch in most seasons. Both are everywhere, so I've no need to go too far afield. I'm spending more time in the other place now than in the real. Sometimes I wish whatever was doing this to me would make up its mind. Stop this yo-yo effect.

Now that I'm confident the shifts will stay on a regular cycle, I've decided to move. If I want to improve my existence here, I need more than the bay shores can provide. I'm sure enough now in my skills to strike out northwest into

Pennsylvania to the iron deposits. Though confident, I'm not crazy enough to try crossing the bay in my canoe. My plan is to stick close to the shoreline until I get to the north bay. When I'm in the real, moving to the Appalachian foothills would mean leaving behind the tools, clothing, and carriers I've made.

My possessions don't fill my outrigger dugout canoe, but they're all I have. The leather sacks, stone hatchet, and hand choppers are priceless. As I travel north up the bay in the other, I'll relocate every twenty miles back home in the real. I might have to hunker down during the worst of winter. My trip will take more than two years, with all the necessary doubling back on foot. Having saved a good chunk of my pay in the last four years, and bought a small motorhome. The rest covers the modest living expenses I'll need along the way when among people.

At the mouth of the Susquehanna River, I was delayed by storms. I weathered those few days near Havre de Grace. My destination is Harrisburg, or where it's at in the real. Garrett Island floats in the middle of the river and gave me a place to rest, refresh and forage. After the storms passed, I rounded the island and sighted smoke. I grounded my boat and watched, waiting to see which way the fire was traveling on the river's western shoreline. The smoke stayed constant for about an hour, not increasing or decreasing, not moving. My hopes rise.

Is this evidence of life? I mean, the intelligent, fire-controlling kind. And is it human? Being the only person in this world has driven me to some wild speculations, including the theory I might be trapped in some advanced alien civilization's terrarium.

They're human, or at least as human-limited as I am. One person stayed here. A hastily made bed of leaves coated the depression they dug for that purpose, softening the dirt, removing stones and roots. Warm coals, one set of footprints, smaller than mine. Nothing left behind except root tops and rabbit bones. I followed the trail. More speculation: if there's one here, could there be others?

Tracking isn't hard. I've become expert at following game trails. Still, I'm cautious, not wanting to run up their back unexpectedly. Their path stays to the easy ground, moving around higher hills, avoiding overgrown areas, following the river south. By the stride, I can tell their pace is neither leisurely nor hurried.

I'm getting further from my bounce point than I'm comfortable with, but finding another person here takes precedence.

The coffee's still hot in my mug. This past bounce started and ended at one of those mega truck stops, me eating at the counter. I know I have at least a week before another shift. I'll continue practicing my skills and studying local maps for most of that time. In the here, I'll drive to where I was in the other, so I can find my clothes and pack when I land again. It's the best way. A thirty-minute drive covers the same distance as a two or three day hike in the other.

It's a woman, so there won't be any male posturing when we meet. She has her back to me, readying her night hole under the trees, up-slope from the small gully I'll need to cross to get to her camp. Watching, I try to determine her skill level. Her clothes are reasonably well made, but she hasn't scraped off all the fur. You need to do that to keep insects from adopting your warmth as home. I'll tell her.

She's fit. Early thirties, I'd guess. Her movements are smooth, efficient, well thought out. Well, no time like the present. I know my voice will startle her, so I wait until she turns in my direction to prevent making it worse by coming from behind.

"Hello."

Her head jerked up. A bone knife flashed in her hand. Man, she's quick with that.

"Stand where you are. Don't come any closer. Are you alone?" Her head is on a constant swivel.

Standing, I held my arms out, no weapons showing. "I'm alone. Thought I was the only one here. My name is Nathan. I go by Nate."

Tilting her head, still wary, she replied, "I'm Emma."

As she stood, her off-hand grasped her spear. Mine lies at my feet. I feel like a piece of meat she's inspecting, deciding if I'm too ripe to trust. Since I bounced in today, I don't have the beard I usually grow on extended stays. I hope it gave me a more civilized appearance than the usual barbarian one I sport here. My fingernails are clean.

After a few minutes, she motioned for me to sit on the other side of her fire.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"You mean, this time?"

"Both."

"The bounces--that's what I call 'em--started five years ago." I shift when the smoke drifts my way. "As for this one, it was the day before yesterday. But I picked up your trail ten days ago — I mean, three days here. Saw your campfire smoke from the other side of the river. Got delayed by a fifteen-mile offset."

I sit cross-legged. She crouches, both feet planted, ready to jump, to run, or fight.

"I've been popping for about the same length of time. Where did you start?" She keeps her hand on her stone blade. Hard to miss her clenched grip. "And when? What year is this to you?"

"Massachusetts. New Bedford, south of I-195. For me, this is 2028. You?"

Emma's brows come together, unsettled. "New London, Connecticut. Navy base there. Same year for me too. I'm hitching and backpacking when I'm on the road."

"You in the navy?"

She picked up a twig, snapped it, tossed half in the fire. "Was. Hospital corpsman, but I quit, or rather, was asked to leave. Medical discharge. I couldn't stand the returns. I went a little psycho for a bit. How do you handle it?"

"I'm a mechanic. Big trucks. Probably easier for me, living alone, not working with people. I've got a motorhome now. A small one to keep my home base close by."

"Home base?"

"Yeah, you know, being sent back to the same place each time."

"What do you mean?"

This confused me. I leaned forward. "Don't you get put back in the same place you bounced from?"

The face she's making. I've seen it before when someone thinks you're nuts or stupid. "No, I pop out wherever I am along my trip. I stop for a few months now and then to pick up odd jobs for cash and wait for the next shift."

She's interested now, relaxed enough to put aside her knife. "Well, there's a difference. You don't have to cover the same ground twice. Where you headed? Anywhere in particular?"

Eyes down, Emma stirred the dirt in front of her. "A general southwest direction. You know, warmer winters. Maybe do the Huck Finn thing, float down the Mississippi." Her eyes come up. "Have you noticed the weather?"

"Yeah, same on both sides of a bounce, and same time of day." I moved my hands to the side and leaned back. She twitched.

"Where are you headed?" Emma asked.

"Eastern Pennsylvania. I know where there should be some iron ore deposits on the surface."

Something's not right in her world. She covered her mouth. Her eyes got big. I was relieved when she let out a belly laugh. "You gonna be this world's only blacksmith? Open up a shop?"

Her laughter brings me to the same. "No. Well, yes. I wanted to see if I could smelt some iron for tools. Build a cabin and farm. Improve my situation here. Don't suppose you've seen any other people, have you?"

She grinned. "No, you're the first to fall into my web." Her comment startles me. "Hey, hey. It was a joke. I'm not some inter-dimensional witch or anything."

"Sorry," I said. "So many things are rattling around in my brain about all this. Ready to accept almost any explanation." Is that sadness or pity on her face? "Hey, before I forget, if you pop out of here, I'm parked at the Conoco on Route 1, at the Berkley exit. You're welcome to travel with me if you want. It's the Ranger motorhome with the red stripe. Maryland plates. If I go first, I'll wait for you."

Her eyes shift. "I'll think about it. In the meantime, want some rabbit stew? I've got seasonings. Go dig up some wild onions while I put the stew pot on."

"You have a stew pot?"

"It's fired clay. I made it here. What do you call this place?"

"I call it the other."

"Good enough." Emma stared into the night, listening. "I've called it a lot of things. Mostly fuck this place."

It was the shortest stay I've had in years. We spent the night in Emma's camp. In the morning, we found ourselves bounced to my motorhome. Both of us have been dumped into the same time and place. Exactly where I'd been when I left. She's in her here clothes, backpack next to her. Not knowing how much time we have on this jump creates its own rules: stick together,

drive to Emma's camp's closest point, compare notes while gorging on civilized food.

As I drove, Emma asked, "Do you think this thing has a center? I mean, a place where the effect is stronger? More frequent? If we knew where, we could get as far from it as possible."

"Hadn't considered it. Possible, I guess. But I haven't seen a difference or patterns in jumps. Been all the way down to Florida and halfway back up the east coast. Except for this quick bounce-back, my stays have been steady at six months. Several years now."

Emma slid her seat back, put her feet up on the dash. "So, we've both been on the move, in the real, for the same amount of time. And now we've jumped together. That opens a lot more questions. Is it simple proximity or something else?"

I glanced over. Emma wants an answer I don't have. I sure wish I had just one, but I have a strong desire to please her. Or is it protect her? I give her the best I have. "Frankly, this can't be something natural. I think we're being jerked around. I can't be certain the decision I made to move to Pennsylvania was my own." We entered Susquehanna State Park. "If I hadn't been making my trip, we never would have met. Well, this is as close as we're going to get with a decent place to park."

By my reckoning, Emma's camp is less than a mile away and my canoe a dozen miles further south as the crow flies. Longer on foot.

"So, we stay here and wait?" asked Emma.

"What's the longest you've been in the real? I mean, in the last year or so?"

"Two weeks for me. How about you?" She taps her knee, accenting her thoughts, wheels turning.

"About ten days," I replied. "So, we may not have long before we bounce again. Let's use this time to plan, compare notes, set some goals."

Emma pulled her shirt away from her chest. "Well, if you don't mind, I'm going to get a shower first. Does the one in here work, or do I need to use the setup at the campground?"

After she showered, we talked for more than an hour before nature called. When I left the bathroom, she was rummaging around in the stacks I pulled down from the top sleeper over the cab to make room for her.

"What's with all the cardboard tubes?" she asks, tapping one in her palm.

"Maps. Travel, geological surveys, historical weather patterns, vegetation, flood plains." I moved closer, wanting to organize the mess and be physically closer.

"Man, I wish I could carry a tenth of this along my travels. All I've got is a highway map," she says, "and all these books. You've got a pretty sweet natural history library started here."

"Just shove those out of the way. Let's move this heap to the campgrounds."

"I've got some steaks in the fridge. You're not a vegetarian or vegan, are you?"

"Nope. Meat-eater." Nudging me, she adds, "I must say, I'm impressed. Steak on our first date. You know how to pick 'em. I looked like the wild woman of Borneo when you first saw me."

"Yeah," I grinned, "but you clean up nice."

This feels too normal. Sitting outside my motorhome in lawn chairs, waiting for the steaks to get a proper burn on them, listening to families and other couples at nearby campsites. Some have been here a while — strung decoration lights, comfortable furniture scattered under stretched awnings.

As I tended our dinner, Emma asked, "Have you ever been touching something alive when you jumped?"

"No, not as I recall. Why?"

"You carry a lot of living things with you. More than forty-trillion non-human cells. Bacteria, viruses, and such. If your gut biome didn't go with you, you'd have a hell of a time with food

digestion. End up with a compromised immune system. I've been wondering if having skin contact with another living being would cause them to travel with me." Hesitating, she wistfully added, "I'd like to have a dog over there. The loneliness, you know?"

She's slipping into a funk. Thinking the same things I've had batter me for so long. Will we be separated after connecting? We eat in silence, stealing glances at one another. I decided to get a dog. If it doesn't go with me when I bounce, it would be nice to have a companion in the real. A mutt that's a few years old would do. Not a puppy needing training, but young enough to have most of its life ahead to share with me. I remember reading somewhere mixed breeds are smarter and less temperamental. More loyal than pure breeds.

Restless sleep. I feel my bed shift. A warm breath, a whisper in my ear. "Hope you don't mind. It's been so long for me."

Emma's words rouse me. She reaches under the blanket, finding me ready. It is purely primal, purely physical, purely beautiful. For the night, we're the only two people in both worlds.

We settle on Dog as the name of our new companion. Emma pointed out we wouldn't want a long-haired canine needing removal of matted hair, twigs, and leaves from its coat. Dog is

a Lab-Shepherd mix if we believe the folks at the pet rescue. I think a few others slipped under the fence in his lineage. He is an attention hound but learned to stay in his corner while we're on the move or shifting things around in the tight squeeze of our mobile nest.

No dogs, wolves, coyotes. I've seen foxes, but nothing to act as four-legged hunter. No large-bodied competition for us in the other place, and no understanding on our part why there isn't. Smaller animals, squirrels, and other rodents take every opportunity to steal from our food stocks. Dog bounced with us without needing to be touched. He doesn't mind. Here or there, it's all the same to him as long as he gets fed and petted. Like me, when you come right down to it.

Settled in for a nap after a meal of rabbit stew, Emma asked, "The three of us, the chosen — what else can you call us without it seeming pathetic? — are on a mission to nowhere." She stopped, gave me a head tilt. "What's eating you, Nate?"

"What are we going to do if you get pregnant? We haven't been using any protection."

"Not a problem. Hysterectomy when I was a teenager. Ovaries still there. Though I might get a little bitchy now and again." Laughing, she added, "So watch your step, sailor."

Emma's twelve-year medical career in the navy included two stints with the marines as a combat rated medic. It's made

her more pragmatic than most women I've known. I didn't realize the marine corps don't have their own medical service. They borrow them from the navy. Emma tells me, "It isn't really borrowing since the marines are a part of the navy, though they don't like to be reminded of that."

Our canoe is full. We've added another outrigger on the other side for better stability. Things are easier now with another set of hands, another pair of eyes. Emma suggested we build a sturdier boat when we get iron tools, one to take sails. Dog makes our evenings, both in the other and the real more like family.

Tenth anniversary

Emma leaned back into my shoulder, her welcome nest every night. "You know, not aging here has its benefits. No accumulation of aches and pains. Our eyesight remains sharp. We've built quite a homestead here."

"Yeah," I say, chuckling and stroking her hair, "And we get two-week vacations in the real twice a year."

"I like having a dependable bounce schedule so we can move between the iron deposits and Titusville without worrying about unexpected pop-outs. Relocating to the oil seeps was a smart move."

"Does calling this place by its name in the real mean anything to you?"

"It lends a connection for me between here and there, to our other home. You did a wonderful job forging the boiler and wood stove, but are you serious about building a boat on Lake Erie?"

Before I answer, Dog came around the corner of our porch, rabbit in clenched jaws. After dropping it at my feet, he tries to worm his way between us. Emma gives way. Dog has the most soulful eyes when he wants attention. Baby, his mate, stays under the porch most of the time, tending her newborn pups.

"Nate! Nate! Come quick!"

Emma's shouts are a cross between alarm and confusion. I'm relieved they aren't of pain. I sprint from the workshop to the garden patch, halting after ten long strides, fifty feet from Emma. She is staring at six children at the edge of the garden, dressed in simple coveralls. They're wearing shoes! Honest-to-God manufactured shoes.

Of the cherub faces, the oldest looks to be about six, and the youngest, maybe four. I'm not much for judging children's ages. When I join Emma, I notice a strangeness about them. They stood in place, side by side, shifting their weight from one foot to the other in silence until Dog came bounding into view.

"Look!" one of the oldest screamed delightedly. "Dog!"

I was gob smacked, both by their sudden appearance and by the fact they know Dog's name. Too weird, too fast. We approached the children slowly, Emma's hand in mine.

Crouching down, at eye-level with the tallest, I asked, "Where did you come from? Are your parents nearby? Any others, any adults?"

The child in front of me, a girl, I guess, replied, "They said you would take care of us."

"Who told you that?"

"The ones who brought us here, silly."

"And who are they?"

The girl stared at me like I was a dunce, pointed skyward. I tilted my head up, expecting to see something. Nothing. I stood and took a step back to Emma's side. She wrapped her arm in mine, then whispered, "Nate, they have webbed fingers. And look at their ears."

At the edge of the woods, behind the children, is a row of metal shipping containers. I know what's inside. I also know our days of bouncing are over. I'm glad we have the goats.