

The Tiles

"We havta see the fountain."

"I know."

"I mean it. I *mean* it. Havta."

"I don't like the way this thing idles. D'ya feel that?"

"And the big bean. *Havta*."

"Doncha feel that? It's like reverberating. It's rattlin'."

The car smelled very clean, and looked the part, inside and out, except for the mess of their suitcase and duffels and loose jackets thrown about the backseat. It was small – a compact, the man had called it – and it lacked pick-up and horsepower and would never be able to tow a thing, but none of that really mattered. The air-conditioner worked, though it seemed to be struggling, might have been the cause of the vibrations. The radio was softly filling the cabin with static. Collie reached forward and poked at the seek button, flipped through.

"Hey. Pay attention."

"We're goin' a mile an hour, relax." He turned a knob and the static went silent.

"How much longer?"

"I don't know. A half a dozen miles further, but beats me on long. Look at this. Cars, cars, cars. Cars and trucks and tractors. And garbage."

They had been off the airplane for no more than an hour, maybe an hour and a half. The airport was as big as a city, and just as confusing. It easily had more people than home, and twice as many shops and restaurants. Now that they were actually trying to navigate to the real city, and getting nowhere fast, just sitting still practically, Melanie almost wished they were back at the airport. It was nice and cool there. People were friendly, sort of. Friendly on the plane, friendly off the plane, friendly when she bought a big pretzel and ate it quickly while Collie got the bags. Everything was metal and glass and new and shiny. They rented the car without much hassle, just filled out a couple of papers and handed over their new credit card and they were ready. It wasn't much of a drive, the man told them, and they'd be at their hotel, The Congress, which he assured them was very nice and overlooked the city, the Loop, he called it, but he failed to mention the line for admission.

"You sure this was the fastest way?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. Maybe."

"I wanna sleep."

"No, no. Not if I can't. You keep me company."

They were inching forward, flanked by angry-looking drivers and new cars and giant construction equipment that sat like sleeping monsters. They looked like they were ready to sow fields, ready to pluck ripe corn off the stalk and throw it into big hoppers, but instead it was the road that was being eaten up and ground and conveyed and packed into the backs of big, dented dump trucks, and taken somewhere. Where?

"Assholes all over. Look at this one."

"Colin Peter Winster. Cut that out."

"Well, look! He's about ready to hit us, here!"

"He knows what he's doin'."

"Shit."

"Stop that."

They crawled forward, and cars seemed to come from nowhere. They ignored the signs that very clearly said than lanes were ending, that traffic was merging, and they got on the shoulder or close next to them, and they crept in, cut in line like children in a cafeteria.

"I just wanna get there and unpack and take a long bath before we go see everything. I just wanna see it *all*. Don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." He grimaced as a car snuck in front of them, just missed sharing paint. He didn't dare honk, just shook his head and pulled his lips tight. He was not sure of etiquette, and he wasn't about to break unwritten rules. He prided himself in fitting in among foreign locales.

"Didja call your mother from the airport?"

"No."

"Collie!"

"I hadda get the bags and then rent this shitbox! Where was there time?"

"She's gonna be worried sick."

"She'll survive."

"She'll be glued to the radio listening for reports about crashes and deaths and kidnappings, that's what she'll be doing. Call her."

"No. She'll be fine. I'll call her from the hotel."

"Jesus, Collie. She's gonna be sick."

"Stop." She heard his neck crack as he rolled his head. "Tell me about the bean."

Melanie perked up. She folded her bare feet beneath her. All worry of Mrs. Winster was gone, and she turned her body toward Collie.

"Oh, I can't wait. If you stand at the right place, you can see the whole skyline. The whole thing. All them buildings, all spread out like in a mirror. The *whole* thing."

"Can't you see the whole thing if you just look at it?"

"At the bean?"

"No. The skyline."

"I suppose you can, yes."

"Then why do you have to look in the bean?"

"Because, Collie! Don't ruin this!"

He chuckled, put his hand on her knee and rubbed it. "I'm sure it's nice. Must be."

"And the fountain is so old and pretty. It's so pretty. They put music and lights with it, and the water dances. Dancing water with lights and music. It's beautiful."

"I saw the pictures, I know."

"I just wanna get there!"

"We're there. Here is there. Look, you can see your skyline right now."

"There are clouds."

"So?"

"So you can't see the tops of the buildings, Collie!"

"They're still there. Imagine them."

"But you can't see them!"

"Look at all these goddamn cars."

The car kept vibrating. Collie could feel it in the steering wheel.

"Look at my hands. Look. They're shaking. This car is funny."

"I'm sure it's a good car."

"It's good at rattlin'."

Melanie sighed and smiled and looked out the window. She couldn't see much work being done. She just saw cars, and reflections of the sun in the windows and mirrors. She saw all the machines, but none of them seemed to be worked. They were just parked. There was a woman holding a sign that said *SLOW* and there was a stack of metal rods, green and brown, but nothing actually seemed to be happening.

"I just wanna get things going! I haven't ever been this excited to be somewhere. Never."

"I know, I know. If I could get through all these people I would, Mel, But I can't."

"I was so tired until we got on that plane. I was so, so tired. Such a long day, yesterday. But then I got so excited I forgot about it. And now I'm gettin' tired again."

"Me, too."

"It was nice, wasn't it? Everything was nice. Everybody was nice."

"Nicest one I ever been to."

"That's what everyone says about their own, I bet."

"Probably. But in my case it's true, too."

"All that time plannin' and then it's over so fast."

"Yep."

"A little sad."

"But now we're here. It's not over. We're here."

"You have to call your mother."

"Please stop that."

"Collie. You have to call her."

"I'm not using that phone unless I havta. And I don't. She's fine."

"She's worried."

"She's fine."

"Look at all those buildings."

"She's always worried. She can worry another hour."

"An *hour*, Collie?"

"I'm just sayin'. We ain't moving."

She sighed again, but smiled.

"I'll tell you," he reached over and touched her stomach, "I won't be so crazy worried all the time like my mother is. Hmm. Never. Don't do no good for no one."

"Everyone says that, too." She was scanning the horizon, the buildings that were slowly growing taller, the clouds, the swarms of dirt and dust like locusts. She looked at the cars around them and it struck her that people were in them. There were other people, living their lives, trying to get wherever they were going, and she hadn't realized before.

"Not like her. No way. Not now, not ever."

A boy was in the backseat of the gold sedan next to them. He stared at Melanie and squinted when she noticed him. She smiled. Collie was still touching her stomach. The boy stuck out his tongue and then ducked below the window and out of sight.

She really was tired. Everything was so draining.

"We're almost there."

"I just can't believe it's all over."

"It ain't, I said. We're here. Continuation. And then we go back home and we start, you know, living life. Our life. Us. Continuation number two. It's never over."

"All that planning."

"You think we won't make plans? We'll make plans."

"All those people. Everyone for us."

"They're not going anywhere. Look at this joker, now." He pulled his hand from her stomach and pressed the horn hard. It was the gold sedan sneaking in front of them, and the woman put her hand up at the sound of the horn. The little boy's head popped back up, and he stared at Melanie again, then sunk into the backseat.

"Jesus."

She started to feel nauseous and leaned her face into the cool breeze of the air conditioner. It smelled stale, but it dried the sweat on her brow. She closed her eyes.

"Almost there, Mel. We're almost there."

She crossed her arms and leaned forward.

"I don't feel great."

"Again? You're probably carsick. Lean back. Maybe take that nap." She fell back into the seat and squeezed herself. "I'll wake you when we get there. You havta feel better. We've got a lot to do."

The car rattled and Collie scratched her knee.

She yawned. "What do we do first?"

"First we get settled."

"Then what?"

"Well, then it's up to you."