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SECOND PLACE PROSE
PAPER PLANES

I eat my lunch with Maggie May on the weekends. We sit on the
eleventh step of Town Hall, using the space between us as our table. I can spot
her curly blonde pigtails from down the road. They bounce up and down with
each step as she sucks on a blue raspberry lollipop from the hair salon across
the street. Her mother lets her sit with me while she runs her weekly errands to
the grocery and liquor store. I have a feeling that every family gathering at
Maggie’s revolves around liquor.

Together we share stories, often choking on the lifeless Bakersfield air.
The whole town smells like armpits, but with Maggie that smell dissipates.
People say those who are born in Bakersfield die in Bakersfield, but I never
want to accept that.

Maggie reminds me daily of her desire to be a sailor and of her love for
pirates. She thinks because I wear a patch over my right eye that I must be a
pirate, so I go along with it when she asks about my life as a great rover of the
sea. The first time we met she asked to see my boat - I told her a fellow pirate
needed to borrow it for an excursion. When she asked about my parrot, I told
her that he eats his lunch with his parrot friends. On occasion I throw in an
“arg matey” while we talk to make it more authentic.
What I don’t tell Maggie is that I work as the Director of Maintenance for the government buildings in the county. Unlike a brave pirate who conquers the sea in rain or shine, I stay inside when it rains, eating my cream cheese and grape jelly sandwich on Wonder bread. I eat it across from the accounting office where the important people work. Most days I check on the progress of my co-workers, who never fail to underwhelm me with their cleaning abilities. I often finish their job by polishing the floor shinier and twisting the light fixtures tighter before I head home.

Today Maggie wears a brilliant maroon wool sweater with golden bells sewn to the front, reminding me that the holidays are soon.

Holidays are the best time of year. Not because of the tinsel, green and red ornaments that hang from every store window Christmas tree, or even because I get to wear my Hanukkah sweater which has dreidels that hang off the sleeves. Holidays mean cards at work slide under my door saying, Thanks for all you do and sometimes, they come with a bill marked with Andrew Jackson’s face. I am never invited to the office parties, but in the winter, some of the pretty consulting accountants will bring me the leftover cheese platters and cookies before locking up.
Maggie asks about my first mate. I describe him like he is my best friend, saying he and I met at Wet Willy’s, this famous pirate food shop. Maggie doesn’t know that the younger gentleman I am describing is really Mr. Altman, one of the consultants who works in the building I clean. He is hardly my best friend, but one time he approached me while I was re-waxing the hallway floor and asked about my weekend. He invited me to his house for a football party but I don’t like football and it would cost me ten bucks to take the bus uptown to his house. Instead, I decided to save that money for a time I would really need it.

Before Maggie came along, I used to sit on the steps alone, eating my sandwich and smelling the tetrachloride from Hoby’s Dry Cleaning. I don’t mind the smell except that I bring it home with me on my sweater vest and Levi jeans.

The odor makes for an interesting combination when mixed with the cigarette smoke coming from the run-down pet store. Fins & Fur is owned by Bo. He smokes Camels on his breaks, each time leaving the front door to the shop wide open, as if the parakeets and ferrets wanted to smell the tobacco. Bo is one of those guys who looks really intimidating, covered head to toe in skull
tattoos and he even has one of those hoop piercings that dangles from his nose like a bull, but he can’t fool me. He takes care of those pets like they are his kids.

On the day we met, the first thing Maggie noticed about me besides my eye patch was the length of my hair. It hangs several feet below my disheveled beard, collecting grays and strays as it inches closer to my hips. I’m certain the first time she came to talk to me she thought I was a rabbi or something.

Why don’t you cut your hair? she asks me. Sandy’s Scissors is right over there, she says, pointing to the hair salon where I went with Mama when she would get perms.

I tell her I used to go to see Ms. Bashwin all the time. She was the most beautiful storeowner on 53rd and 4th St in her prime. And she had the biggest hair and bosoms I had ever seen (I keep this to myself). I tell Maggie that each time Mama brought me to the shop, Ms. Bashwin would clap her hands with joy and give me a squeeze on my sore cheeks and a handful of sweets. She would offer me raspberry, lemonade and Dr. Pepper flavored lollipops from her bucket. Now as I look in the window down the street, that bucket is labeled Tips and filled with pennies and dollar bills.

Can you keep a secret? I ask Maggie.
She takes her hand and motions zipping her lips.

I’m afraid, I tell her, surprised with the words that come out.

You can’t be afraid, she tells me. Pirates are fearless.

Laughing, I sweep a chunk of gray hair to the side to reveal my ears. She stares, as I anticipated. To say my ears are the size of eggplants would be an understatement. I notice Maggie scoot her body an inch backwards and cover them back up.

I didn’t mean to scare you, I say.

You didn’t, she pauses, I’ve just never seen ears that size before.

You see, I say, I’m afraid of exposing these.

Maggie reaches out as if asking to touch my ears. I let her poke at them as though they were a rare species.

As she pokes, I tell her about my childhood friend who used to do the same thing. Lucy Sheridan was the best friend I ever had. Though she had been in my class since kindergarten, I didn’t talk to her until the day when I discovered my ears had doubled in size.

It was the morning of my brother Dixon’s sixth grade spelling bee. He had been practicing words all night and my sisters, Mary Jane, Delilah and Charlotte were quizzing him. Mary Jane was the oldest, so she would announce
the word Dixon had to spell. Delilah was the next oldest. She would time Dixon, giving him thirty seconds to spell each word while Charlotte would stand next to Dixon, offering him a single Hershey’s kiss for each word he got right. I was the judge, with the help of Mary Jane.

That morning when I woke up, I noticed that my head felt heavy. Not like when you have a headache but like when you have an extra brain weighing you down. At first that’s what I thought had happened, until I looked in the mirror and saw that my ears had grown. I had been doing my usual morning routine: brush teeth, wash face, steal Mary Jane’s lip balm to put on my lips and then wash my hands to get rid of the raspberry scent. But before I could wash my hands I stopped, confused by the sight of my ears in the reflection.

I snuck into Dixon’s room to grab a beanie. Everyone in the house was distracted with preparing him for his competition, so I kept quiet, hoping not to take away from his big day. But at school I forgot about my ears when I went outside for recess. Some of the kids in my class had let me play kickball with them for the first time. The sun glittered the field where I stood in the outfield. Forgetting about why I put the hat on in the first place, I took it off. It was the last time I was invited to play.

Lucy, the chubby blonde girl who always ate a brownie and Poptart at snack time, was the only person who sat with me despite my distinct ears. She walked over and unloaded her weight next to me on the bleachers, greeting me
with her bubble-gum breath. Instead of saying bello like a normal person, Lucy took her fat sausage finger and stuck it right on the top of my ear, pinning it down. She held it there, pressing it into my skull.

Why would she do that? Maggie demanded. I tell her to be patient and wait until the end of the story. I go on to say how I shouted with surprise and asked Lucy what in the world she was doing.

It’s bothering me, Lucy told me, chomping on her Hubba Bubba.

What do you mean? I asked her.

Look Oliver, she said. Those size ears belong in cartoons. They can’t be real unless they’re magical. My brother Max told me magic isn’t even real, so I’m gonna press them down to keep them from growing. If magic is real, then they will grow no matter what and then we will know who is right.

What about the other one? You’re only going to keep this one from growing? Then I’ll be lopsided!

Lucy laughed at me and tugged on the right one, pulling me an inch closer so that I could feel her warm breath against my skin.

When I’m done with this one, I’ll get to the other. First we gotta see if anything happens. She took the hand that wasn’t pressing down on my ear and offered me a handshake.

Sound fair? she asked.

I managed a grin, studying her speckled green eyes and double chin.
Sounds fair, I told her, interlocking her sausage fingers with mine.

That was the start of our friendship.

I tell Maggie how I really didn’t want Lucy to press down on my ear. It didn’t hurt, but I wanted to see what I could do with them in case they really did have powers. Maybe I would develop magnified hearing and be recruited to join a secret agent agency. They wouldn’t even need to use their fancy radio systems and secret wires to capture sound; they would have my supersonic hearing for that.

Did they? she asks me, her blue eyes glowing with anticipation.

Did they what? I ask her back, knowing what she meant.

Did your ears give you superpowers?

Why do you think I cover them up? I throw in a wink.

Maggie is fascinated by the story of my childhood. Each time she sits with me, I tell her something new about my family or my memories as a kid. If I can’t think of anything that day, I make up a pirate story to keep it believable, at least until she is old enough to come to her senses. At age seven she still
believes in the Tooth Fairy. When she is older I will tell her I’m really just a janitor. Wouldn’t want to spoil the magic too soon.

I tell Maggie how Mama wasn’t around too much because she was a stewardess for United Airlines. She traveled during the week and sometimes on the weekends to fly rich people all over the world. She would bring me back toy planes for being such a good boy while she was gone, which could be for weeks at a time.

You’re the good one, she would tell me. You never cause trouble, so you get a present.

I loved those planes because they came from Mama. My favorite was the Modelart Channel Helicopter. I would carry it with me wherever I went, and sleep with it like it were my teddy bear.

After my ears were discovered, I went home after school and decided to see if they gave me any power. I was hoping for the ability to hear bugs talking or Mrs. Coates singing in her kitchen across the neighborhood.

At first I wiggled them back and forth with my fingers, but my hearing didn’t change. Then I scrunched my nose, lifted my eyebrow and moved my earlobes up and down, but that didn’t do anything either. I gave it one last shot, closing my eyes and wiggling my ears, but I still had normal hearing. But when
I opened my eyes, I saw the planes lift off the carpet and circle around the room, like pink and blue cotton candy swirling together. As long as I twitched my ears, the planes stayed in flight.

The next day when I went to school, I spotted Lucy on the swings. I walked over and she asked me how my ears felt. The same, I told her, hoping she wouldn’t notice they grew more and would leave me alone. Still she continued to hold down my ear.

A boy, Jimmy something, asked me in the lunchroom if I wanted to be in the school play. The director needs someone to play the dog, he told me. With your ears, we won’t even need a costume. I refused the offer, but thanked him for asking. For the next few days, Lucy would come over and hold my right ear down until her finger got so tired she couldn’t feel it anymore. We would sit together at recess and Lucy would tell me about her three-year old brother. She would tell me about how he was always hiding his food so that he wouldn’t have to eat it. The night before, he had stuffed his chicken nuggets into his diaper so he could skip to dessert. That had us laughing until recess was over.
When Maggie sits on the steps with me, she always comes prepared with questions. Where is the farthest you’ve ever sailed to on your ship? Antarctica. Have you ever seen a whale or shark? Several. Do you have a map for buried treasure? Yes. Did you always want to be a pirate? No, I wanted to be a pilot.

I tell her about the recurring nightmare I had until I was sixteen. There I was, dressed head to toe in my Air Force uniform, saluting the Lieutenant and hopping on board, co-pilot by my side. In the dream I always flew to the same countries: Japan, Germany and sometimes Sweden. But in the middle of the dream my co-pilot turns to me and tells me to read the message on the screen. It says *warning* but I can’t see the words. The dream ends when I shift the control wheel to make a sudden landing in the middle of the ocean and jolt awake, drenched.

What do you think it means? Maggie asks, trying to psychoanalyze me.

I think it means I was destined to be half blind.

Is that why you wear an eye patch? Maggie asks me. So I tell her about Billy.

I was never good in school. I didn’t like to play with the other kids and it worked out because they didn’t like to play with me either. After taking several tests, the teachers took me to a different classroom, one that smelled like dried up mold and the plastic swirly slides in McDonald’s play areas. All the posters
were printed in bigger letters and all the teachers spoke slower when they asked me questions. They called this place, The Bonus Room.

In The Bonus Room, my teachers let me play with my planes all day long instead of playing with the other children. I never used my powers in school but it was still fun to play with my planes. Some days my teachers would get optimistic and encourage me to engage with other children looking at world maps, playing with action figures or solving puzzles. But nothing could pull me away from my toy planes. I loved them more than I loved those sticky colorful candies you bite off the paper.

Maggie tells me she loves those too. I make a mental note to pick them up at the store next week. An early Christmas present?

I continue by telling her about Billy and how he was the biggest kid in school. He wasn’t afraid of anybody. He was the one who started all the name-calling and the singing of, Oliver and Lucy, sitting in a tree, when Lucy sat with me. I lost sight in one eye when I told him to shut up.

When Billy tackled me, I didn’t feel a thing. It was like all of my senses had left my body; I was numb. But when the dirt cleared, it was like an old-
western film, Billy on one side of the swing-set and me on the other. Billy threw the first rock, hitting me square in the kneecap. I could hear Lucy yelling, Don’t do it, Olly! But I had already launched a small rock into the air. It missed Billy by two whole feet. I had never been much of an athlete.

I replay that day in my head with a million different objects flying at my face. Confetti at a birthday party, an apple pie during a school food fight, a delicate snowball during a playful winter game. Snowballs are harmless unless they land under your clothes and freeze to the skin. Even then they are much more gentle than rocks.

I stayed home for a week after the incident with Mrs. Coates, our elderly, Ethiopian neighbor. She would watch us while Mama was away. To cheer me up she asked me to help her with her tailor work and I agreed. She hummed while she worked and I tried to echo it back but was never able to get all of the words. She taught me how to sort the silks from satins and chiffon from cotton in the laundry room, her voice carrying through the air with a hint of fabric softener.

We’re gonna get that one eye nice and strong Oliver, she assured me. But all I wanted was Mama.

Lucy came to visit two times. I remember how surprised Mrs. Coates was to see her standing outside, her feet covering the words, “welcome”
written on the doormat while her hands held chocolate chip cookies. I remember they tasted salty. She must have mixed up the ingredients.

When you lost your eye, did your magic vanish?

Quite the contrary.

After the incident, I spent every waking hour in my room flying the planes. Soon I didn’t even need to twitch my ears or even look at the planes. At night, I lay in bed, surrounded by planes on all sides. Mrs. Coates worried I would hurt myself by bumping into a sharp edge of the toy in my sleep but without them, I assured her, I would have my nightmare. She turned out the lamp and flicked on the nightlight as I fell into a deep sleep, helicopters and planes by my side. I always waited for her to leave the room before twitching my ears once and allowing the planes to circle above me through the night, surrounded only by my blanket.

Mrs. Coates reminded Dixon and Charlotte of the witch in the Hansel and Gretel fairytales because she wasn’t nice to look at. She had a big head and even bigger hair that took up an entire room. Mary Jane just thought it was odd how she only ate television dinners and smelt like stale flowers from a funeral
home. But I grew to like her because she would let me play with her late husband’s collectible wooden planes. She wouldn’t read to me the way Mama did, but she sure could make pancakes.

Thursdays we had breakfast for dinner and we all liked our pancakes prepared in special ways. Mary Jane asked for banana pancakes, insisting that no bananas get cooked inside the dough or else they would be undercooked. She preferred the sliced fruit to sit right on top of her stack. Dixon always got the same shape: two ears and a circle so that it resembled his favorite Loony Tunes character, Bugs Bunny. Charlotte was simple: two pancakes with semi-sweet chocolate chips in every bite. Delilah wanted blueberries cooked inside and would get upset if Mrs. Coates forgot, putting them on top like Mary Jane wanted.

I liked my pancakes plain, none of that stuff messing up the essence of the golden brown doughy flapjack; it was all about the toppings. I drenched them with melted peanut butter and whipped cream. Mrs. Coates would bring me spiced chamomile tea to go with my masterpiece. She called the tea, the Oliver Special.

Did anyone know about your powers?

No, I never talked about my powers in the house.
When I tried to show Mama my ears the first time, she wouldn’t look at me and she wouldn’t listen. She said I was silly and appreciated my sense of imagination but wanted me to keep it to myself. She said other people would think I was weird. So I kept it hidden as long as I could.

I tell Maggie about the day. Mama was away and I thought Mrs. Coates was outside in the garden. I took the fighter planes into the living room set them flying in the air, no longer needing to do anything but wiggle my ears once. I was in the middle of massaging my cheekbones, which were sore from smiling, when I heard an object crash to the floor. When I looked up, I saw the green ceramic mug Mrs. Coates would pour my special tea into each night. She had seen the planes in the air.

What did she do to you? Maggie bites her nails with curiosity.

Instead of fainting or yelling or asking questions, Mrs. Coates hummed the same unfamiliar jingle and then something happened that I will never forget.

Tell me, tell me! Maggie insists.

I saw the mug rise from the ground, each ceramic piece fitting back in place like a puzzle. I tell Maggie how the tea swam like an upstream river and splashed back into the unscathed mug. I tell her how the Oliver Special traveled across the guest room and landed in my lanky hands, steam rising with the flowery fragrance.
I don’t believe it! Mrs. Coates had powers too? Maggie was spitting Poptart crumbs in every direction.

Yes, I say, wiping the pieces that had landed on my cheek.

I tell Maggie how for the rest of the week, Mrs. Coates and I flew planes around the house while my sisters and brother were at school. She even let me fly the planes outside, just as long as I held a remote control so that the other neighbors wouldn’t be suspicious. After that, Mrs. Coates told me I was not allowed to be ashamed of my ears. In fact, every month she would take me to Ms. Bashwin’s to get my hair cut to keep my ears exposed. But that was a long time ago.

So did you ever go back to school? What about Lucy?

With Mama away all the time, Mrs. Coates made the decision to have me homeschooled. An old man would come to the house and talk at me in words I didn’t care to understand or listen. I would just drift off and think of Lucy. I missed school but only because I missed her.

I tell Maggie that sometimes, in moments of weakness, I would take my own pointer finger and stick it on my ear the way Lucy used to. But it wasn’t the same. My fingers were skinny and rough while hers were chubby and tender. And I could never get the right pressure.
I wondered if Lucy had found anyone else in the schoolyard to fix.
There was Ethan Rae with the big nose, Mason Keller with the pointy lips and Simon Sharp who had the weirdest shaped thumbs I had ever seen. Maybe Lucy had taken on a new project, but I had no way of knowing.

The Old Man would get mad at me because instead of reciting my times tables, I would resort to singing Mrs. Coates’ jingle over and over. I had finally gotten all the words and would sing it to myself to feel better.

Maggie begs me to sing the jingle. When I refuse, she pouts and tugs on her pigtails. I give in, singing the tune as best I can in my tone-deaf voice. She hums along.

_Eyes are good_
_For admiring sites._

_But ears are better,_
_For hearing at night._

_I remember her,_
_She’d bring the light._

_My friend and cure,_
_She gave me might._

_And if I could,
I'd walk to great heights.

I'd never let her

Leave my sight.

Is that about Lucy? she asks me.

It’s about helping a friend be happy again. And overcoming fears.

Oliver, Maggie says. Are you afraid that if you get your hair cut people will bully you the way the kids did when you were little?

This has to be the best question she has ever asked, far better than my favorite pirate snack. I sit for minutes deciding how to answer. And then Maggie tells me that she has a fear of anything that flies. Birds. Planes. Even butterflies.

I laugh, of course, because I’ve spent weeks telling her about my love of planes. I ask her if she’s ever been on a plane and she shakes her head no. That’s why she wants to be a sailor, she reminds me. She prefers water to the sky.

It’s safer, she demands.

I think she underestimates sharks.
Maggie’s mother comes to pick her up for the day. Maggie smiles and hugs me. She tells me she will see me next weekend and I tell her she can count on it.

But when Saturday rolls around, Maggie is nowhere to be found. On Sunday, she is still missing. I contemplate reporting it to the police, but I’m sure her mother just decided to take her to her dad’s for the weekend or had bought enough groceries for that week. For the next three weekends I wait on the eleventh step and eat my Wonder bread sandwich in silence, candy buttons in my pocket, awaiting Maggie’s arrival.

After weeks of loneliness, I spot her pigtails from across the street, outside Sandy’s Scissors. I wave but her return wave looks more like she is motioning for me. I wait for her to join me on the steps but she doesn’t. My stomach tells me it’s time to open up my brown paper bag and dig in. I pull out my cream cheese and jelly sandwich but when I do, I am hit with something on the shoulder. Much lighter than a rock, I think. And then I see it.

A perfectly made paper airplane rests at my feet.

Read it! she screams, biting those fingernails.
I glance at the plane, trying to figure out what it means. I notice a message on one wing, scribbled in blotchy magic marker. It reads, I faced my fears and flew this plane.

Flip it over, she shouts.

I flip over the other wing.

Your turn, I read aloud.

Without thinking, I grab the plane, stand up and cross the street. I hand it back to Maggie and give her a hug before I make my way through the door of Sandy’s Scissors. Ms. Bashwin turns to see who is at the door and I can tell she recognizes me when she drops her scissors to the floor. She squeezes my cheeks and leads me to the salon chair. I sit in the chair and close my eyes as she trims away years worth of hair. She says it will make a nice wig for someone who needs it. That’s nice, I think, and she fills me in on the last twenty years of her life. I close my eyes and listen.

The bell rings as the next customer walks through the doors. I hear him shout, Everyone, come look!

Ms. Bashwin is only halfway done, but we venture outside to see what all the fuss is about. And that’s when I see Maggie across the street, standing below as the paper plane circles above her in the sky. Soon a group of kids join her to watch the plane swoop and dive as though it were magic.
Looking to Maggie who winks in my direction, I feel my ears twitch. We all watch as the paper plane flies through the air on the windless Bakersfield afternoon.