

## Sidewalk to Nowhere

He waited where they always met, an overgrown patch of green in the remains of the city. Geneva, his grandmother called it. Here, the friends spent hours talking, dreaming, or simul-streaming on their audvis implants.

The narrow vacant lot wasn't anything special, especially compared to the looming ruins of the massive red-bricked structure across the street or the mysteriously dry river-bed nearby. Still, Treger loved this spot because of what he called "the sidewalk to nowhere," a crumbling pathway down the middle of the lot which abruptly ended just yards from the old street.

Often, like now, he sat at the edge of the sidewalk staring into the silent darkness as if perched on the brink of the world overlooking an abyss.

At his side, a sack of Miabelle's favorite contraband. *Honestly*, Treger thought, *Mom has to know I snatch these from each day's batch.*

An engine. Treger's head jerked to the left. He'd only ever seen a vehicle here once before. He scrambled to his feet, searching for cover. Then, he saw her: Miabelle Pohe on her dad's quad-runner. She often piloted it around the family scrapyard, but she'd never brought it this far out.

Hitched to the back was her dad's scraprack topped with an angular pile covered in a tarp.

*What is she up to?*

The engine cut. Miabelle tugged off her goggles. "Ready for a big night, Treg?"

He grimaced. "We're not streaming the new cast?"

She laughed and hopped from the seat. "Help me unload these." She unstrapped the tarps to reveal a stack of four huge metal letters. He recognized them from the roof of her old family store.

"Your dad know you have these?"

"Of course," she scoffed. "He always says that if we reopen the store, he'd call it something slicker than *Pohe's*. So I asked him if I could have these letters."

So started their usual game. What would give first: his curiosity or her excitement to tell all? He was determined to win this time and silently helped her carry each letter to the sidewalk. As they set the *H* down, she eyed his bag with a sly smile.

"Those what I think they are?" He nodded.

She clapped. "Your mother's the best. You know she makes extra for you to take, right?"

As she nonchalantly talked about pastries, Miabelle pulled thick zip-ties from her jumpsuit pockets. She strapped the giant red *E* to the *O*.

He finally broke. "Ok, ok. I give up. What are we doing?"

"I knew it was killing you!" She smiled. "I win! Tonight's an important mission I've been planning forever. We're taking these with us."

*Why take them off the quad runner then?* As if hearing his thoughts, she pulled back her sleeve to reveal a thick silver band. The octagon display glowed pale green.

“No, Meebs,” he shook his head defiantly. “No way. Does your mom know you took that? That’s severely illegal.”

“I know,” She spoke calmly. “I knew you’d be afraid at first...”

“I’m not *afraid*,” he said. “I believe in laws and in not getting arrested.”

“We won’t be arrested. Mom’s supervisor never checks the log. She hasn’t used her quota of trips this month and the system resets at midnight. This is the perfect time.”

“It’s not about getting caught,” Treger pleaded. “Or jail. Well, maybe a little about jail. It’s about...ethics. You know what happened with the 2016 Cubs thing.”

“We don’t *know* that was time manipulation.”

“Sure, we do...there’s whole net-threads proving it,” Treger’s voice grew increasingly high-pitch.

“Treg.” Miabelle soothed. “I get it. I do. But this is way low key. It’s just a way to help. Seriously. It’s not *changing* things as much as, you know, spreading some good. I’ve been reading a lot and, man, it was so dark in 2020 and...”

Treger lost it. “2020! 2020? No, no, no. Totally out of the question. Even licensed Travelers are restricted from 2020!”

“I understand,” she held his eye contact. “I won’t make you do a thing, but I believe in this. I’m going to do it. It’s a way I can make people happy. I won’t talk to anyone. I have a mask. I’ll be careful.”

Silence. She stared at him as he looked vaguely toward the sidewalk’s abrupt end. She was always so sure. He didn’t have that. She’d take the step off the brink into the abyss with confidence that it’d work out. He was happy looking in from the edge.

*Maybe*, he thought. *Maybe*. After all, Miabelle was not reckless. If she thought it was safe, it probably was. If she thought it important, it was. And, maybe, he could finally find out where this sidewalk used to lead.

“Tell me the plan.”

Thirty minutes later, Miabelle and Treger were zip-tied to the stack of metal letters. Thick cloth masks covered their faces. “How did streaming a cast turn into breaking international time law?”

“Oh, grab the donuts,” Miabelle said. He did.

Miabelle’s fingers fluttered over the bracelet. *BEEP BEEP BEEP. WHOOSH.* A sharp pull yanked on Treger’s insides. His world went white. And then, they were back in the grassy lot, now well-kept and lit by street lamps. The abandoned buildings that sandwiched the narrow lot were young again—without broken windows or peeling paint. Treger closed his eyes to joyfully listened to automobile engines and dogs barking.

He remembered the sidewalk. His eyes eagerly popped open. It still led to nothing but grass. He laughed.

“You good?” Miabelle asked. He nodded. They cut the zipties from the signage that had travelled centuries with them.

“Where do we leave ‘em?”

She pointed away from the street to the corner of a brick building. “The back entrance of the city museum. They’ll get them to the right place.”

“What difference do you think this is making, Meeb?” Treger said. “I mean...we aren’t giving them the vaccine. We aren’t *changing* anything.”

“We don’t have the vaccine,” she said. “But this is something we *can* do. We can bring joy. And that matters.”

One at a time—*H, O, P,* and *E*—they hauled the red letters around the building and through a parking lot.

“I’m gonna leave a note and then we’re out,” Miabelle said.

“I’ll be right back,” Treger said as he disappeared around the corner.

Miabelle pulled a paper scrap and a pencil from her pocket. She wrote, “Put these at City Hall. Remind people of hope.” She attached the note to the *H*.

Meanwhile, Treger snuck through the shadows until he saw it: the bizarre metal lion he’d seen in a photofile. He jogged to the back of its darkened building and laid his sack on the step. He wrote his own note: “These flavors might make people happy.”

When he returned to the nowhere sidewalk, Miabelle pretended to be upset. “Where are my donuts?!”

Treger laughed. “Well, they make you so happy, I thought they might do the same here.”

“Wonderful idea,” she smiled and took his hand. “Here we go.”

*WHOOSH.* They were home. Sort of. The lot wasn’t so dark anymore. Now, the sidewalk led somewhere.