

Diversion

by Meg Wolitzer

A landscape has the tendency to take on new dimensions when night comes. I first found this out in the south of France, as my husband and I slowly made our way along pockmarked roads in the day, and then flew along those same roads in the evening. The potholes seemed to have been mysteriously filled in, and the twisty dirt walkways now resembled superhighways. “Why do you think that is?” I asked Lewis.

“Because,” he answered, always the pragmatist, “at night you can't see what you're walking on, and you can put your imagination to use.”

That makes sense, but I choose not to believe it, sticking instead with my own theory of the French government hiring workers to secretly steamroll over roads while everyone else is inside eating dinner, so that when the sun goes down, lovers can stroll leisurely past fields and vineyards without tripping and disrupting the romantic mood.

We have not been to Europe for five summers, and the landscapes we get to see now might be considered less exotic, but are certainly no less fascinating. What I mean is that a passerby would probably like them well enough, but wouldn't be inclined to take any snapshots. We have been frequenting amusement parks.

Our daughter Jane will be eleven this month, and she is depressed. The end product of aging has just occurred to her, and she has refused to go to summer camp, or do much of anything since Lewis's mother died.

The phone call came very early in the morning, as most calls of this kind seem to. Lewis reached across me to pick up the receiver. It was dawn and his mother had just died of a stroke. We lay on the bed for half an hour, not moving or speaking. “I have to pee,” he finally said, bounding from the bed like an oversize dog.

His mother had decided to fly south several winters ago, and ended up staying permanently. We had not seen her since the move,

but she often sent gifts: glazed pink necklaces made of shells and shark teeth that looked lethal. Every month or so we would receive a large wooden crate of overpriced, tiny oranges that had not been sprayed with dye. Jane refused to eat any. "They're not real," she said, pushing away the greenish fruit. We ended up giving oranges to friends, to the mailman.

At breakfast we told Jane. She was to leave for camp the next morning, and I had just finished the last of her name tapes.

"What about the funeral?" she demanded. "When is that going to be? Shouldn't I be here for that?"

"You don't have to," I told her. "We'd rather you just went off to camp and enjoyed yourself."

But she would have none of it. "I'm not going to camp," Jane said, beginning to cry for the grandmother she barely knew. Lewis put his arm around her, his elbow knocking over a glass of milk. Jane stood up, furious. "You got milk all over my shirt!" she said, pointing an accusing finger at Lewis, before running from the room.

I could tell, right from the start, how hot the summer would be. If I even went outside for a second, to retrieve the newspaper or take out the garbage, dark ovals would form under my arms where the seams of my shirt joined. I was working on my thesis, and Jane sat inside all day, right in front of the air conditioner, letting it blast in her face. She was doing that kind of thing a lot lately. One morning at six o'clock I came downstairs because I heard a noise. It was Jane, her face almost pressed up against the TV screen as she watched "Sunrise Semester."

"You'll get radiation," I said quietly.

She turned and stared at me as if I were a fool. "So?" she said. "It doesn't matter."

I tried to discourage her from staying home from camp. "Don't expect me to take you to the beach or play Crazy Eights with you," I threatened. "I have to do my paper on health care in Chile, and Dad is very busy with his own work."

She understood completely, and made her own lunches, slathering cream cheese on rye toast, then heading back to the waiting

television. She was unsmiling, she was a zombie, and I wanted to take her by her sloping shoulders and pull her toward me in a bone-crunching embrace. It was too hot, though, and I didn't even try.

Jane is tall, with surprisingly long arms and legs. When she walks she lopes; her feet shuffle her along, and her arms swing independently of one another. She denies her body, as if letting her appendages know that she could get along just fine without them.

All summer I watched her move gracelessly from the television to the refrigerator, her skin winter-white, her eyes dull as old stones.

Like a landscape, Jane is very different at night. When she is asleep, she appears happy, with her eyes squeezed tightly shut as if playing a game in which one person has to count to a hundred before breaking into a mad dash after the other players. Jane is the counting child; impatient, anticipating something I do not understand, something I can only guess at. Her arms and legs fold up like a bridge table when she goes to bed, and her mouth is pulled up into a queer smile, which Lewis does not trust. "Don't delude yourself, Ellen," he whispered to me once, as we stood in the doorway of her darkened room. "She's not really smiling, you know. She's grimacing."

There was one saving grace, and I found this out by accident. I was rummaging through a shelf in the den to find the thesaurus, when a television commercial came on. "Hey there, kids," a smooth announcer's voice summoned, "get Mom and Dad to take you to Funland this summer for a terrific time. Rides! Games! Prizes! Fun!" I turned to watch. A film clip of a blond family on a roller coaster flashed on the screen, and suddenly Jane perked up. Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened slightly.

Casually, as if trying to feed a deer from a salt lick, but not wanting to frighten the animal, I said, "That looks pretty neat, doesn't it?"

She nodded her head vigorously, and I told her that we would go to Funland on Saturday.

That night Lewis and I made love with newly found energy. "She smiled, did she," he said as he burrowed his face into my neck.

“Yes,” I answered, moving over him like a shadow. “Yes.” Yes.

Lewis is a patient man, and I can tell that in thirty-five years he will be the kind of person who takes out his dentures and clacks them at children whenever they beg him to. He was up very early on Saturday, scraping threads off stalks of celery for our outing. He looked thin as he stooped over the low counter. I am used to seeing him sitting down at a desk, surrounded by slide rules and blueprints of a new building he is designing, and every time he stands up I am awed by his leanness and his height.

Jane did not speak once in the car, but sat slouching in the back seat, clutching a little purse in the shape of an orange that her grandmother had sent from Florida several months ago.

“When people get too old, Jane, they die,” I had said one afternoon.

“What do you think I am, a *retard*?” she had responded, and the discussion came to a close.

The VW does not have air conditioning, and all the windows were rolled down. Lewis turned up the volume of a disco tune, and hung his left arm out the window, slapping time on the side of the car. It seemed, then, that the stagnancy of the summer was lifting. I smiled at Jane in the rearview mirror and quickly looked away before she had time to frown back. I secretly pretended that she smiled broadly at me.

Since I had been inside working most of the time, I had forgotten how hot you feel if you stay outside for too long. We wandered around for hours, playing ringtoss and roulette, going on the teacup ride that whips you into a frenzy as if you were caught inside a centrifuge. I nervously thought of my innards being separated; all the heavy organs settling to the bottom, the fluids rising to the top. We had lunch in a place that smelled like elephants. Hot dogs rotated on a grill for hours before people claimed them, and children sucked unnaturally blue colored ices. Jane was still unsmiling.

“What do you think of this place?” Lewis asked her.

“It's boring,” she answered.

“Shall we go home, then?”

Jane hesitated, then said, "No. Let's go on the roller coaster."

So we did. It was named "The Monster," and the front car had a gargoyle face painted crudely on it. Jane sat between us, and we each rested a protective arm on her reddening shoulders. As the ride began, and the car moved slowly up the incline, she stared rigidly ahead, waiting. At that lingering moment at the top, she had a pleading, brink-of-excitement look about her. As the car plummeted down the track, her pale hair flew up from her neck, where it had clung, damp from the heat, and her mouth widened into a slow scream. Her eyes opened and she craned her head forward, as if she herself were propelling the thing.

"Again." We were standing in front of "The Monster" when it was over, and she was begging for more. Lewis and I had turned into court jesters, two crazed servants who would do about anything for this sullen child. After two more times on the roller coaster, we made our way home. Jane curled up on the backseat and slept soundly. "That was wonderful," I said to Lewis. He started to speak, but stopped himself. It was almost as if some minor miracle had occurred, and speaking would only reduce its potency. We were like two lovers lying in bed, one staring up at the ceiling and gathering up the nerve to ask casually, "Was it good for you?"

I could not work on my thesis. It was not a question, as it so often is, of writer's block. I simply did not want to work; I wanted to make Jane happy, I wanted to rescue her.

"You know Julie Rubin?" she said one afternoon. "The one in my class last year with the night brace? Her sister drowned in their built-in pool. She was three."

"That's very sad," I said. "Her poor parents."

Jane leaned back in the chair and swiveled, stretching her arms and legs out like a starfish. "I could die any day," she said. "Anybody could. You don't have to be old."

I stared at her for a long time, then got up to clear the table. "We are going to an amusement park today," I said. "How does that grab you?"

She immediately jumped up and loped into her room to get ready. I had found a way of getting through to her. At the park she ignored all the booths, and didn't want to go on any of the other rides. Only the roller coaster could make her smile, could make her let loose that abandoned wail as we swerved and dipped at breakneck speed.

Every day for the next week, I took her to the amusement park. Jane and I reached our highest level of satisfaction at the same time: she, as the car soared down the track of the final stretch, and I, as I watched her expression at that very moment, like a voyeur. We shivered together.

That Saturday, Lewis went with us again. I had been talking incessantly about the miraculous changes in Jane, and about how therapeutic roller coasters had become. This time we went at night, because both Jane and I were developing bad sunburns on the backs of our legs. "I was depressed as a kid," Lewis said one day. "I didn't want to go to school or talk to anyone." I have never been able to understand the mechanism of childhood depression. I've always viewed early pain as something not fully realized until the age of thirty, when it comes crashing down in a great heap, and the faces of cruel stepfathers, the guilt of groping in the dark, and the sad milk-smell of cafeterias appear in dreams once again, reminding you that they will always be by your side; silent, invisible comrades.

This time we went to an amusement park called Joytown, and I imagined a small-scale Sodom, with naked, suntanned people writhing in the sawdust below the Ferris wheel, their bodies turning blue, then red, in the alternating light of a neon sign.

The roller coaster did not have a name, but Jane didn't care. It had a long, oiled track, and she appraised it with a keen eye. Everyone else on the ride was between the ages of thirteen and twenty. Girls with streaked hair clutched loosely stitched, stuffed polar bears that their boyfriends had just won for them. The place was evil at night. In the distance I could hear the unending tape-recorded laughter of the mechanical clown in front of the fun house. This was a landscape that changed drastically at night; the teenagers who boarded the roller coaster looked like commuters.

They were there to pass the time only, and I expected one of them to open up to the sports page of a newspaper as the ride began.

Joytown's roller coaster was more treacherous than any of the others, or maybe it just seemed that way at night. As the car rounded a curve, it seemed to lose itself for one awful second, about to fly off the track.

"Again!" Jane was radiant; she loved it. Lewis could barely suppress a grin.

"Okay. Again," I said, and Lewis ripped a few more tickets from the loop we had bought.

As we were boarding, I turned to Jane to ask her why she loved the roller coaster so much. What was it, I wondered, that made her forget the things that troubled her at all other times? What made thoughts of Julie Rubin's drowned sister, of her grandmother's and finally her own inevitable death disappear?

"What do you like about the roller coaster?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, and then said in a slow, even voice, "I like it because it's exciting. You know, Mom, this must be what it's like right before you die." We climbed into the car of the roller coaster, pulled up the safety bar and waited, holding on for dear life.

