



“Brick Days” by Abby McLean
3rd Place, Short Story 16-18

3rd

There is a fly in my water. It isn't dead, but fluttering around, jerking its legs and body like it still has a hope to make it out. With my coffee in hand, I stand staring at it, and finally, flinging my head back, I finish the last swallow in the cup and set it in the sink on my way out, not bothering to clean the cup or throw the fly away.

Resting before the front door of my cramped apartment is my bike. It's silver and the best and ugliest bike I have ever had. It's not even that ugly, the absence of beauty doesn't necessarily leave ugly as the only option.

The bike came with a helmet but I never wear it because it's pink and I hate the color pink. Just because I am a girl doesn't mean I am forced to like certain colors, so I don't. It's not as if I am doing any dangerous biking anyways.

Outside, I start riding and wait until the brick ground smooths out to concrete before I situate myself. I hate the part of the sidewalk covered in brick, there is no rhyme or reason to why it's there, the irregularity and suddenness of it make me mad. But it is the path that marks sections of my day. I leave the apartment and return with the feeling of bricks below me, the beginning and end of being out into the world for the day or hour.

It's a nice day, but "nice" is the worst way to describe anything. It's subjective and doesn't say much at all. Still, today must be what most people would consider an all-around agreeable day. The sun makes my skin glow and buzz with warmth, and the stage of morning dewiness hasn't ended yet.

I head into a different part of town, one where the trees grow taller and greener and the apartments are older and rusty around the edges. How fast the city can change, from rats in the trash cans and two-dollar slices of pizza to tall trees and rusty flower beds hanging outside windows.

As I turn the corner, there is someone there, turning the corner too. They stumble away before we crash and I try to jerk my bike away at the same time, right into a fire hydrant. I'm

unable to catch myself and I fall on my cheek and shoulder, my legs twisted and scraped up with my bike.

“Oh my god,” a hushed, high voice sounds like it’s coming from far away and not even directed at me.

“Oh my god,” the voice says again and now I can tell it’s a female. I can’t imagine that her voice is truly that high but she goes on.

“I’m so sorry, oh my god, oh my god. . .”

I push myself up and pull my legs out from under my bike, stretch out, and take a couple of deep breaths. All before I look at the girl, in a probably useless attempt to regain composure. At first, she appears fuzzy and blurred, all I see is dark skin and it looks as if she is wearing a halo that glows before the fuzziness fades. She has a short, dyed golden afro, and wide brown eyes. One of those wide-eyed girls that people write songs about. She wears jean shorts, a tight blue tank top, and black boots, she has a round rosy face and a small gap between her two front teeth.

First, all I see are her wide eyes, she looks scared, and like she cares a lot more than she should. I wish she was a bit angrier or solemn, I want to yell or get angry but her face makes that feeling fade.

“It’s okay, I’m alright,” I say, not feeling alright but hating the look of this girl’s concern.

“Are you sure? It looks pretty bad. Should I call an ambulance?” She crouches down to my level and her voice seems to drop an octave.

“Oh no, no. Do you realize how much that could cost me? This,” I point to my cheek, “isn’t bad.” But I turn back and look at my shoulder for the first time. As I do, the pain seems to finally register in my brain. I close my eyes as my head swims and I feel as if I am about to pass out. I raise my fingertips to my cheek and they come away sticky and red.

I manage to push my bike away from the fire hydrant so I can lean against it. The girl doesn’t say anything for ages, so I open my eyes a crack to see if she is still there. She has

shifted into a cross-legged position and watches me. It's uncomfortable, I'd think it would be for her too but she hardly reacts when I squint at her. I wait longer for my head to stop throbbing, and can almost feel it as the blood drips down my shoulder and cheek and slowly begins to dry.

"You don't have to wait here," I tell her as she shifts over to sit next to me.

"No it's alright, I'll wait to make sure you're okay."

My head hurts so bad I don't say another word and stare at the brick building across from us. It's an apartment building and windows periodically pop up out of the otherwise uniform brick wall it feels nice, for once, to follow the pattern.

The city wakes up fully now, and it's as if I am not a part of it, like the noises and sounds are coming from a tv or radio, and I am just listening in. A couple walks by with arms hooked together. The woman wears extravagant yellow pants that blend together, almost looking like a skirt, with a white shirt on the top, while her partner wears jean pants and a jean jacket. They don't stop but the woman looks back at us once, whispering to the man as she does. The girl beside me raises her hand and shows the gap in her teeth, saying we're alright. Then the yellow pants and jean-covered man are gone around the corner.

Another group walks by minutes later. A girl and a boy stuck in that muddled stage between being adults and teens. They are wearing plaid pajama pants and loose t-shirts. Then I see what the girl next to me is actually looking at, a black cat perches on the boy's shoulder. Its claws digging into his skin, the cat's yellow eyes are almost bigger than the girl's next to me. The people don't look twice at us, but the cat does. It can't seem to take its eyes away and leans far on its perch as they round the corner.

"I think I feel better now." I stand up easily as proof before carefully stepping to look around the corner. There are the cat's big eyes seconds before it disappears out of view behind a tree.

The people and animals that walked by hardly feel real now. I have never seen such intriguing people before so I worried, for a moment, that my brain filled in a couple of facts.

“Are you sure you’re alright? You can walk home by yourself?” the girl asks.

“Yes, really I am, I hope I didn’t bother you too much.” Then I tell her, “Thank you, really, for waiting.”

She truly smiles at me for the first time, showing her wide smile and shining eyes in all their glory. For the first time, she doesn’t look afraid. I try to smile but end up grimacing from the pain in my cheek.

“It wasn’t a problem, I was glad to.”

Then we step apart from each other, not yet looking away. I go on down the street to the park, and she moves on around the corner.

I arrive at the bricks on the sidewalk and that’s when I know I am home. Without them I wouldn’t have stopped. My mind is caught up in the earlier events. How I didn’t have the best morning but there was still someone who was kind. How strange it seems that I will never see that person again and how awful that I never asked for her name.

I make it back upstairs, clenching my teeth until I reach the door. I wash and clean my skin before I go to the kitchen and get a glass of water. As I drink, I stare at the fly in my cup from the morning. It’s still causing ripples in the water, it’s still alive.

Then, I think of the girl who waited on the sidewalk so long with me. With the gap in her teeth, her wide eyes, and contagious smile that makes my cheek hurt, then and now.

It keeps hurting as I pour the fly down the sink and leave the kitchen.