NICOLE BOYCE

RAT KING

THE IDEA WAS THIS: Disneyland without kids. Elly and James had done it once before, in their late twenties, right before they got married. They'd been in Japan over Halloween, and they'd spent three days blowing off steam at Tokyo Disney before returning to Canada. All their friends back home had been adopting dogs, getting mortgages, and having babies, while they'd spent the last six months hopping around on discount airlines, eating cheap dinners from 7-11, and sending home pictures of novelty snack cakes. To visit Disneyland before returning home—and to blow all their remaining cash there—had felt like a delicious and hedonistic "fuck you" to adult responsibilities. They'd ridden Space Mountain 14 times. They'd skipped the teacups. They'd gotten dehydrated, had never stopped for meals at appropriate times, and had eaten turkey legs every evening before getting tanked at the hotel restaurant. Shortly afterwards, Elly had gone off her birth control ("to feel more comfortable in my own skin") and—as a side effect—had gotten pregnant with twins.

Now, standing in line outside Disneyland Anaheim, she looked over at James. The last four years had been kind to him. He'd been so supportive about the pregnancy, and he wore the role of "father" well. That's not to say he was textbook-handsome; he was short, with a crop of greying hair that parted unflatteringly in the back. And he'd begun softening, physically, since the girls were born, as had Elly. It was as though their formerly sharp hips and shoulders had wrapped themselves in foam, had undertaken an involuntary childproofing.

Elly took a swig of water, trying to rinse the taste of airplane travel from her mouth. There were two teenage girls in front of them in line, unsupervised and giddy. One of them held a Sharpie, which she was using to draw a huge, cartoonish penis on her friend's shoulder.

This seemed, to Elly, like a risqué activity for the Disneyland lineup. The other people around them were all looking up at the gates or down at their

children. There were baggies of Cheerios, squeezable yogurts, and bottles of kid-friendly sunscreen. Elly scanned the line but saw no other childless couples—just her, James, and the teenage girls. She elbowed James, motioning toward the teenagers.

"Sharpie art straight ahead."

"I remember doing that," he whispered to Elly. "I was really into Rush in grade nine, and I got a marker from the art room one day and wrote 'Rush' on my stomach in these horrible, Celtic letters."

"You told me that once," she said. They both acknowledged this without malice or regret. After you've been married for a few years, all the best anecdotes have surfaced, and that is just a fact, like the smell of each other's breath, the finding of each other's hairs on the soap, the weight of each other's ambitions and college loans. Stories you once told on second dates became a kind of shared autobiographical chant—a cobbled and involuntary mythology.

One of the teenagers leaned over and whispered something in her friend's ear. Her friend gasped with exaggerated shock. "You didn't!"

The girls collapsed onto each other, giggling. They were so pale and lanky; they looked like half-cooked noodles. And there was such vulnerability in the way they confessed to each other, like they were so *excited* by the prospect of intimacy, like intimacy was occurring to them for the first time.

Nothing is more erotic than openness, Elly thought. Or at least she used to think that. It's something you think before you start peeing with the door open.

Before the twins, Elly had never thought seriously about motherhood. With her and James it had always been "if we have kids," never "when we have kids." This had worked for Elly—"if" was open-ended enough to satisfy a vague, niggling interest in parenthood but noncommittal enough that it didn't threaten her independence.

Then they had come home from that trip to Japan and tied the knot, and gradually, subtly, all the things they'd mocked and never needed—all the parts of their parents' lives they'd judged as crass and mundane, all the suburban prisons they'd bemoaned in teenage diaries—started to seem less objectionable, even desirable, and then finally—after the surprise pregnancy, the hybrid SUV purchase, and the comforting ascent through their chosen professions—impossible to do without. Elly remembered the first few

weeks of parenthood (though chaotic, exhausting, and devastatingly hard) as feeling like a deep breath after a long dive—the satisfaction of embracing something she'd been denying herself. The feeling had surprised her. Even during pregnancy, though she'd loved those embryos the second she saw the ultrasound, she'd had trouble thinking of herself as a mother. Fast forward three years—through vaccinations, pre-school, swimming lessons, hernia surgery for James, the death of Elly's father, the stomach bug that knocked them flat on their backs last winter, and the time last week when she found a jar of bread ties in James' nightstand—and it was hard to think of herself as anything but.

"What's this?" she'd asked, carrying the jar into his home office. She'd tried to keep her voice casual.

"Oh, I've been saving them," James had said, still looking at his laptop. His tone, too, had been unnaturally light.

Elly had rotated the jar in her hand. Then she'd put it down and left the room. She hadn't asked why because they both knew.

There had been other collections over the last year: the elastic bands she'd found in his shaving kit, the restaurant matchbooks that spilled from his glove compartment, the huge packages of beef jerky and apple chips, and the rows of pickle jars lining the laundry room wall. One night she'd come home to find strips of pumpkin hanging all over the kitchen like makeshift streamers, the room thick with an earthen stink.

"I'm air-drying them," James had explained. "We can use them in soup!"

It wasn't hoarding exactly, or at least it wasn't what hoarding looked like on TV. James' collections were too small, and his explanations for them—though tinged with a certain doomsday paranoia—were too plausible.

"Everything just started to feel so *real* after the girls were born," he'd told her. "Did you hear the CBC piece this morning about climate change and extinction rates? I saw a tweet about it, and . . . god, it's a ticking clock, Elly. It's terrifying. This is *their* future, you know? It's their future. So we may as well do what we can, right?"

He'd seen a therapist a few times because these were the kinds of things for which one saw a therapist. Still, the whole situation had felt precarious to Elly, like at any second she might open a closet and 10,000 tiny Jameses might tumble out—jars and jars and jars of him. She'd waited for that moment like she'd waited for her daughter Julia's night terrors: the weight of

silence before a scream. When those screams had come, biweekly for Julia, Elly had held her wailing daughter, trying not to panic. Once, in desperation, she'd put Julia in the shower and turned the water on, watching her child wake up wet and stunned, a mass of warm breath and soft, chestnut hair, like a gosling that had wandered in from the lake.

The night after Elly had found the bread ties, she and James had been lying in bed.

"Tell me what's going on," he'd said. "I can tell you're stressed."

"I just have this feeling," she'd told him, her eyes closed in the lamplight. "I used to get the same sensation when I got out of a swimming pool. It's a heaviness or something—a heavy feeling in my gut. It seems to come at the oddest times—not necessarily when I'm upset—and it feels like . . . dread. Like total and absolute dread."

James had held her hand, his strong grip practised and reassuring. Elly was supposed to be the worried one in this marriage. She had nursed anxiety for years before she'd ever nursed a child. It was only after the kids were born, as James started to show his own capacity for fraying, that she'd been forced into this new role of the strong, practical spouse. She didn't like it.

They'd laid in bed awhile. "Maybe we should go away for a weekend?" James had finally suggested. "Somewhere frivolous—Vegas, Osoyoos. A short flight. Good cell reception in case of emergency calls about the kids. And a reasonable price."

They couldn't afford a vacation, but James had banked some vacation days, and they'd saved some money for a Tofino trip in the spring. Elly had laid in bed weighing all this, the dread mounting in her chest. The girls would love Tofino, but James had a jar of bread ties in his nightstand. They had to do *something*.

Twelve hours later, they'd booked two tickets to Anaheim and asked James' mom to watch the girls for the four-day absence. "Disneyland?" she'd scoffed. "Why not a nice all-adults resort?" In the end, it came down to a question James had asked Elly after he'd jokingly made the Disneyland suggestion.

"Disneyland without kids," he'd said, smiling. "Can you think of anything more perfectly selfish?"

Inside the park gates, the Sharpie-covered teens from the lineup disappeared into a crowd of ball-cap-wearing families. James and Elly began

walking down "Main Street USA." Strangers squealed around them. The air smelled like caramel. Nearly every storefront displayed toys or candies in the shape of Mickey Mouse.

"I remember thinking this was the most magical street in the world when I first came here," Elly told James. "Like something from a John Hughes movie."

She had, of course, already told James this when they'd visited Tokyo Disney, several times after when they'd looked back at the photos from that trip, and even a couple times since when they'd put on a Disney movie for the girls.

Elly watched James navigate the crowd. He was a couple feet ahead of her, carefully weaving through sticky-handed children. She was amazed, as always, by the comfortable way he carried himself; he was so seamless—a perfect merging of body and personality. It was part of the reason she'd fallen in love with him. But now she found herself looking beyond his confidence to a strained and anxious future. When would the breaking point come? She pictured a hundred scenarios. Her stress began combining with the candy fog of Disneyland, and she felt faint. She reached to put her hand on James' shoulder.

He flinched, looking back with panic. "Oh, it's you," he said, smiling. "I thought a bird shit on me."

"Wow, thanks."

He put his hand over hers, patting it. They wound through the crowds by the castle and made their way to Tomorrowland. First on the docket: Space Mountain. This was tradition. Only this time, upon entering the familiar space-age queue, they found that the Anaheim version of Space Mountain—recently augmented and modernized—now contained *Star Wars* projections at unexpected moments. It was jarring and peculiar, like when a good friend starts wearing a new perfume.

"Why do they always do that with rides?" James asked Elly afterwards. "Mess with a perfectly good thing?"

"Beats me. Money, I guess?"

"But now it's so prescriptive. Before it was a classic: space travel. You could pretend you were in any franchise you wanted. Now it's like: Oh, you were imagining yourself in the Alpha Quadrant? WELL YOU'RE IN *STAR WARS,* AND DON'T YOU EVER FORGET IT." He stopped walking, literally throwing his hands up in the air. "Imagine what the Trekkies must think!"

"They probably think *Star Trek* isn't a Disney property, so it makes sense that it's not represented at Disneyland." Elly cringed at her snippy tone. It was 9am, she was already cranky, and her feet hurt. They'd grown after the girls were born, and she still wasn't used to buying the right size. Some parts of her, truthfully, had never stopped feeling pregnant. The twins were a secret and vulnerable part of herself made external—an organ she'd agreed to carry outside her body.

She grabbed James' hand and smoothed his palm with her thumb, trying to rub a message through the skin: "*I'm sorry for being catty. I'm sorry you're anxious. I'm sorry I'm anxious. I'm sorry for all of it.*" It was her standard way of apologizing without apologizing.

The thing about Disneyland is that it all blends together. After Space Mountain, James got a candy apple that he ate carefully to avoid disturbing his recent and expensive dental work. They rode Pirates of the Caribbean and Indiana Jones. They rode Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, which was James' favourite because it was "the only Disney ride that takes a simulated spin through hell!" They rode the Jungle Cruise and made fun of the earnest teenager trying to breathe life into it. They rode the Matterhorn, which kind of sucked, like it always did, but it was a classic, so they sat through it.

After the Haunted Mansion it was time for lunch.

"Where do you want to eat?" James asked.

"Anywhere that doesn't serve chicken fingers."

They settled on an overpriced restaurant on the California Adventure side of the park. James, happy to see there was no plastic cutlery (a small consolation for him on their otherwise consumerist holiday), assessed his asparagus, lifting one pale spear by the tip. Elly poked into her roast beef and wondered what the girls were eating right now. Probably Campbell's soup and grilled cheese. Her mother-in-law was a terrible cook.

"Did you notice that the Haunted Mansion smelled like ranch dressing?" she asked.

James laughed. "I didn't. Makes sense, though. This is the land of buffalo wings."

"Who do you think supplies Disneyland with ranch dressing? Like, who is the gold-standard, Walt-chosen purveyor of ranch?"

"Could one supplier handle so great a task?"

"It made me think of that time Zoey hid her salad under the couch when

my dad was babysitting. Jesus, what a smell."

James smiled, but Elly saw his shoulders tense up. They had a rule that had been recommended to them by veteran parents: never talk about the kids while you're out for meals. James always took this so literally, as if even a passing mention of the girls would shoot a silver bullet through their youth and sexuality (which he somehow imagined were otherwise intact?). So Elly knew what was coming next: a bizarre non sequitur to prevent them from talking about parenthood.

"So, this guy at work told me about something called a rat king."

She shook her head. "Smooth segue, James."

He grinned. "Hear me out. I guess sometimes, in rat-heavy countries, a bunch of rats pile onto each other for warmth. And their tails get tangled, or they get into some kind of sticky substance, and then they're just stuck together. So they become this enormous super-rat that moves as a single entity."

"Jesus. We're eating."

"Isn't that fascinating, though? They collect them in museums. There's one in Estonia that has sixteen rats! What do you think? Should we go to Estonia to meet the rat king?"

"How did this even come up? What were you talking about?"

"Landfills."

Of course he'd been talking about landfills. The air between them grew tense, and Elly bit into her beef, which tasted lukewarm and hostile.

"Think there are any rats in Disneyland?" James asked.

"They'd never allow that," Elly said. "They'd have like . . . chinchilla kings. Constructed in some back room by an employee making minimum wage. Very twee."

James smiled, but only barely. He was probably wracking his brain for another and more stimulating table topic. Before kids, they'd constantly talked about the future. Every dinner date ended with a spinning of possibilities: places they might travel, pets they might own, what their lives might be like "if they had kids." Now they knew, within reasonable forecasting ability, what the next five years likely held. It was hard to channel the speculative energy they'd had as childless people. It was hard to channel themselves as childless people.

Elly and James had been among the last of their friends to have kids, so they'd endured a lot of unsolicited warnings and musings. Elly had always

hated it when her friends described how they "couldn't remember who they were" before having kids or waxed about the "unique and powerful" love of parenthood. It had made her feel so terrible and vacuous, like a guitar without an amplifier.

"You haven't loved till you've had a child," one of her colleagues had insisted. "It's as simple as that. Your heart will open in ways you can't imagine. And it's so *hard*! My god, it's so hard. There is literally no comparison."

These sentiments had made Elly's blood boil. "I know parenthood must be hard," she'd told James. "I respect that. I do. But do people really believe that nothing else in human experience can compare? It's narcissistic or something. It's a total martyr complex."

When Elly had found out she was pregnant, she'd been determined to *never* make those kinds of comments, so she'd never complained to James' younger sister about the sleepless nights, the projectile vomit, or the cracks in her nipples. She'd kept a stiff upper lip when Julia needed to go to the emergency room after Elly had worked a twelve-hour shift, and she'd tried to talk as little as possible about the texture and frequency of her children's bowel movements.

She'd tried. Really, she had. But what was *truly* tiring, if she was honest with herself, was pretending she hadn't been wrong about parenthood. Because, in truth, it *was* different in the same way that a broken ankle was different from a bad flu—a difference not in degree but in *kind*. Neither type of challenge was more pitiable or unpitiable; neither one was a more or less noble use of human existence. But parenthood, in all its daily deep and banal ways, was a different mode of being.

Acknowledging this now, she felt tired—completely and existentially tired—so she put some potatoes in her mouth and chewed for what felt like hours while a server handed out Mickey Mouse-shaped chocolates.

"Should we get turkey legs?" James asked.

Elly's energy had been waning since lunch, and by 5pm she could tell James was worried about her. The pressure of their trip—the desire to feel and act free—was mounting. Their first day was almost over. They were supposed to be enjoying this. They *had* to enjoy it. So James had insisted on riding all the rides the girls weren't big enough for, even though thrill rides made him queasy. They'd ridden the Tower of Terror four times in a row without stopping for bathroom breaks or conversation. By the fourth

time around, they were both nauseated. The tower had recently adopted a *Guardians of the Galaxy* theme, which made James flush and mutter again about "nothing being timeless anymore." Sitting there next to him, strapped into their final freefall, Elly had imagined each of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* characters as a parent. Would Chris Pratt send his kids to Montessori school? Would the raccoon bank his baby's cord blood? James, meanwhile, had just stared straight ahead, as if experiencing the ride's fall in earnest. His face in the souvenir photo had been a shocked mask of realization.

Now, sweating, ankles sore from waiting in lineups, Elly wanted nothing to do with food. Still, she found herself saying, "Turkey legs sound good." It was time to buck up.

The turkey leg cart was parked in front of the castle—one of the park's busiest areas. You could smell the turkey from ten feet away. Watching the legs rotating under a heat lamp, Elly became aware that she would never have let her daughters eat from this cart; instead, she would have forced them to get some sad Disneyland carrot sticks that would have cost eight American dollars. Even here, in this engineered scenario of freedom, she thought of nothing but her kids. This was the perpetually divided attention of motherhood—the constant remembering, considering, worrying, and planning. It was a non-stop psychic presence that sat on your brain and kept rubbing and rubbing. When did they last eat? Are yam fries a vegetable? Did she pack the Robert Munsch book Zoey likes? Are they sharing their toys? Are they learning to regulate their emotions? What's the state of their bums? Sometimes she wanted to ask James if he regretted it—not if he regretted *having* them but if he regretted his expectations of parenthood itself. She'd made a good show of being a realist, but some secret part of her had still expected a legacy, a feeling of genetic satisfaction, or a guaranteed sense of *meaning*.

"Two bird hocks, milady!" James announced as they reached the front of the line. The pimpled cashier looked mortified. Elly inspected James' face, terrified that he might wink at her, which would indicate the beginning of a creepy midlife crisis. Thankfully, he just paid for the legs and handed Elly the larger one. "Your meat, my duchess."

"It's always princesses in Disney. Have you noticed that? Never a duchess. Never a countess."

"There is weird absence of lower nobility, now that you mention it. Where are the Disney earls?"

"And Nala's lions in waiting?"

"I want a Disney movie about the middling aristocrat living on the outer edge of the kingdom."

"I think that was Gaston."

James laughed.

They sat down on a bench to eat their meat. Children were screaming all around them—mostly with glee, but sometimes in upset. Elly surveyed the living wall of bodies, and it occurred to her that the sheer number of goldfish crackers in the park was probably greater than the population of Anaheim.

A flash of black caught her attention, and she turned and noticed a cat. It was weaving in and out between people's legs, sprinting toward an unknown destination.

"James, look."

James shifted his attention from his turkey leg. He'd always loved cats and had been especially distraught when they'd needed to give up their tabby after Julia developed an allergy.

"Weird. It must be one of those Disney cats. I read about them. They eat the rodents, apparently."

"Definitely no Disney rat kings, then."

They both watched the cat as it ducked and wove. After pausing to drink from a fountain, it approached a child near the fountain's edge. The child—a boy—looked about two or three. He was eating a sandwich with no crusts.

The cat began rubbing up against the boy's shins. The boy bent down to pet the cat with a firm hand. Near but behind the boy, Elly saw a tired-looking couple eating sandwiches that matched the boy's: brown bread, floppy construction. They must be the boy's parents. They looked totally absorbed in their budget lunch; the man picked at his crust, while the woman desperately sipped from a thermos. For her sake, Elly hoped it contained coffee.

The cat was still begging for the boy's sandwich. It started to get aggressive. Elly could hear it yowling. It began putting its paws up on the boy, more than half his height when it stretched out. It wanted that sandwich.

Elly's shoulders tensed up, and she felt a tingle of anticipation as her inbuilt "crying detector" started to hum. Her girls cried at the drop of a hat, and she couldn't even count the number of times they cried each week. Zoey in particular was convinced that she looked beautiful when she wept, and she would stand in front of the mirror bawling for what seemed like hours. And every time she cried, even though the crying was senseless and vain,

Elly *felt* it deep in her gut, like someone was laundering her organs one by one.

"This isn't good," James said. He too was watching the cat. Together, he and Elly stared as the boy raised the sandwich high. The cat let out a hiss, the fur on its back raising. The parents were still eating their lunches.

Neither James or Elly said, "Should we do something?" It didn't need to be said. Instead, they sat beside each other, silent and totally still, the question hanging over them. There were only seconds left to decide. Soon it would be too late. But the turkey leg felt so hot in Elly's hand—it was nearly burning her. And she was mesmerized, totally mesmerized, by the scene that was unfolding.

The boy reached down toward the cat. It hissed and reared back. The boy grabbed its tail. The cat lunged forward and bit him.

The boy's scream was piercing. Instantly, his parents jumped up, crowded around the boy, and started prodding and assessing. It was hard to see what was happening. The mother moved to the side for a second, and Elly saw blood dripping. Jesus. There would be a hospital visit now. Maybe a big American hospital bill, depending on the parents' insurance coverage. Elly's face grew hot. There would be ointment and daily bandage changes. Would there be antibiotics? Rabies shots? Imagine that: getting rabies in the most magical place on earth.

Elly just kept watching as the father wrapped the boy's hand in a napkin. The mother was pressed up close against her son, whispering something as he screamed, his face as red as an overripe plum.

Elly could feel James watching too, as rapt as she was. She squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back. There was something horrible and erotic in that squeeze.

Right at that second, the other mother looked over toward Elly like she knew that Elly had just violated the most sacred of covenants—an unspoken vow every mother takes daily that is renewed with play dates, bitch sessions, and the camaraderie of toddler horror stories. The vow is this: "I've got your back. I will help to keep your child safe." So if you see a kid about to eat an esophagus-sized Lego, you step in. If you see a toddler wandering toward an intersection, you step in. If you see a stroller rolling away while a mother loads groceries into her vehicle, you step in. You step in out of compassion and basic human decency—out of the desire to protect the children themselves. You step in because it's the right thing to do, but you also do it as a

duty and service to other mothers.

Now Elly watched the family start to walk away, forming a protective circle around their injured son. She licked turkey grease from her fingers. James blew his nose into a napkin. They both knew they'd never speak of this, never dare to tell another parent. They had watched it happen. They had sat by and *watched*. And that—to watch but feel no responsibility, to watch but take no action—was the ultimate indulgence. The exact opposite of parenthood.

Though it didn't feel as good as their first time in Disneyland, it did feel good. Elly was ashamed of how good it felt. Adrenaline still pumping, she could almost smell her own daughters' past injuries—all their scraped knees and bashed foreheads, all their copper and sweat, the constant worry for their safety and well-being, the ceaseless thinking of them and thinking of them and thinking of them. But then someone wheeled a churro cart past, and for a few seconds Elly thought of nothing at all. The sun was hot, and the air smelled like cinnamon. The parade would start soon. Her hands were slick with turkey grease, and she was thousands of miles from anything that mattered.