

Mother Ship

Who are these people? It's like I've woken into a strange reality. I feel foreign, even to myself. This world feels fake, contrived. Where am I? There must be a bug in my programming. I need to analyse my situation to determine the fault.

I look down at myself: teenager, male, wearing shorts and t-shirt, no shoes. I hate wearing shoes. I enjoy the feel of the ground under my feet, the changing textures: asphalt, dirt, concrete, wood.

My programming allows me to appear 'normal'. This façade of a teenage male is my cover. My real identity is unknown to those around me. It is unknown to myself, to some degree. But it is those around me that I must protect myself against. If they discover the truth about me, it could prove fatal to our relationship. I stop at this thought: is that a bad thing?

I was placed into this setting to experience a 'real family'. I have conducted background research on what constitutes a 'real family', using written and visual sources from across the planet. Even with all this reference material, I am still trying to determine if this family is 'real'. I am concerned my alien background influences my view; by not being a biological offspring, I might never see this family as 'real'. Is this 'a family' or 'my family'?

I take in the people surrounding what appears to be a large flat surface with food arrayed across the it. Ah yes, a 'dining table'. There's a young, blonde boy beside me, shovelling food into his mouth so fast he seems to be filling his cheeks before he can swallow, so much so that they bulge out from his face like those chipmunks in that cartoon I saw once. The boy is watching the talkers keenly, and laughing at everything they say, but saying nothing himself (which would be difficult in any case, considering the contents of his mouth).

Opposite me is a girl, older than me, quiet, sullen, eating small amounts of food at wide intervals. She has mousy-brown shoulder length hair and a wide jaw. She is not pretty, nor unattractive. I search my database and discover 'handsome' to be an appropriate word to describe her looks, even if a little old fashioned. She

occasionally glances at the talkers with scornful looks. There is anger within her, repressed.

Next to the moody girl is an older woman, perhaps in her forties, with dyed, short brown hair. I can tell it's dyed as the roots are showing. She has such similar features to the girl that she must be her ... mother? Is that the word I'm looking for? A database check confirms this is the correct word, yet it rolls awkwardly off my tongue, like a foreign language. The woman is the girl's mother. She is also the blonde boy's mother. The mother tosses a comment into the conversation every now and then, but she is a part of the *mise en scene*. She tries to censure the speakers, but she has no success.

The talkers are an older boy (almost a man, I observe, in both his human size and his mannerisms) and an older man, sitting at opposite ends of the table.

The older boy has dark hair, bright eyes, and an easy confidence that is evident through his ability to converse with the man.

The man, with cropped grey hair and moustache, is authoritarian. All at the table are obedient to him, even if their eyes betray their secret disdain. This man is father. I know this. How do I know this? It takes me a few seconds to remember, then it all comes flooding back. Father equals discipline, and I have experienced his discipline. Subconsciously he knows I am alien, other, and he does not like it. He targets me when he can, delivering his own brand of justice for real and imagined transgressions. What do my eyes betray? Fear? Anger? Hatred? I'm not sure my programming covers those emotions.

As in all conversations around this dinner table, this conversation is not to be repeated outside this house. These opinions are not to be aired in public, for fear of *what other people think*. The mother is obsessed with *what other people think*, to the point where I am unsure she has any thoughts of her own. My storage banks are brimming with data on her preoccupation with *what other people think*. She is unaware they think she is inconsequential, weak, a joke.

The father does not care *what other people think*. He is self-absorbed. He is provider and master, and is confident in this self-image, no matter how

incorrect it may be. I have enough evidence to conclude *other people* see him as a drunk and a bully. I wonder, if he knew, would he care? I somehow doubt it.

‘Did you see Chris on Sunday?’ the older boy asks. A search of my memory banks tells me Chris is a cousin.

‘Bloody fool,’ the man declares and takes a swig of his beer. ‘They do too bloody much for him, which is why he’s weak. He’s never had to stand on his own two feet and fend for himself. And look where that’s got him.’

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ the woman objects. The man and older boy ignore her.

‘I don’t understand how he got her pregnant,’ the older boy says, ‘in this day and age.’

‘Careful,’ the woman warns, with a glance at us younger people.

‘It’s alright,’ the man declares, ‘they know what’s happening.’

‘It’s pretty hard to hide it!’ the older boy jokes.

‘If any of you get into a situation like that you’ll be on your own,’ the man declares, not looking at anyone in particular. The sullen girl gives him a dirty look.

The conversation continues in much the same vein, but I block it out. No matter the topic, the man’s attitude does not change: from ‘bloody foreigners’ to ‘bloody gays’ to ‘bloody hippies’. He has the same grievance with everyone who is different from him. I have miles of recordings of his rantings in my memory banks. No-one challenges the man’s opinions. I tried in the past. Challenging him is not tolerated. I don’t try anymore.

This kind of talk grates on me like fingernails on a chalkboard. There’s something congenital in my programming that is sickened when I hear such prejudice. I cannot bear listening to the father’s abusive rant, fuelled by the alcohol in his hand, so I quickly finish my meal and leave the table.

‘Where are you going?’ the man demands as I head for the kitchen.

‘I’ve finished,’ I respond with a non-response.

‘Humph’ is all he says, dismissing me from his mind. My exit opens a doorway for others. The blonde boy and sullen girl follow. The man looks displeased as we abandon him, but the mother and older boy stay to appease his ego.

I retreat to the sleeping room to contemplate my situation. The blonde boy follows and throws himself down on one of the twin beds. From his actions I comprehend we share this room, and one of the beds is his.

‘What a pain in the arse!’ the blonde boy says.

‘What?’ I ask, startled from my thoughts.

‘Dad,’ he says. ‘Typical. Getting drunk and abusing everyone.’ So, it is not only me who detests the father’s behaviour. Something about this seems vaguely familiar. I recall having this conversation with the blonde boy and the sullen girl in the past.

I am unsure what is happening with me. My memories come back in dribs and drabs. There seems to be a disconnect between my true self and the one living in deep cover with this family. I feel disoriented, confused, vulnerable. My cover can be blown at any moment if I do not stay on my toes. I decide the best course of action is to say little, agree with much, and seek my own company where possible. Perhaps my self-repairing systems will have me back to normal by morning.

‘Mmmm,’ I respond to the blonde boy, saying little.

The blonde boy has moved on from our conversation and is reading a comic book. He does not register my reply. I decide to follow his example and read as well. I lay down on the other bed and open a copy of *Watership Down*. There are drawings of rabbits on the cover. My thoughts drift, and I become lost in my mind.

When is the mother ship coming to collect me? Am I to be left here indefinitely? I have been amongst this family unit for 15 years. I scour my memory for data on this time period, and note the age of consenting adulthood is 18 years. This means I need to remain here for another 3 years before I can legally break free.

Three more years! The thought of enduring the father’s obtuseness and the mother’s obsequiousness for another three solar circuits is too much to bear. I wish the mother ship would contact me. Unfortunately, I have no way of communicating with it at this time, nor it with me.

I prepare myself for the nightly recharging session. No-one pays any attention to me, which is fortunate in my current discombobulated situation, and slightly disconcerting. I cannot remember when I became insignificant to these people, but I am. I make it into my bunk without a word or a look from a single human in this house.

This is going to be a long three years.

Three years later.

I sit on a bus as it pulls into another city, a strange city. I don't know what to expect. I'm full of nerves and excitement and really need to pee. The trip was twelve hours, so I am bedraggled and crumpled and tired.

She is here.

We finally made contact after 18 years. She had been hoping I would reach out to her, and I had been hoping she was waiting for me.

My biological mother.

I have left those other, caustic people behind, in their small-minded world with their limited imaginations. There were no goodbyes. I was ostracised for wanting this. *How could you do this to your mother* was thrown at me by everyone. But that's the thing – she's not my mother. She never really was.

She did not want me to make contact with my 'real' mother, because *what would people think*. She was fearful *other people* would find out I was adopted (which I was) and this would somehow reflect badly on her. All she is afraid of is the truth. None of her fears are *for me*; they are all *about her*. I realised a while back that I exist in her life as a mirror. I am only useful when I reflect back to her what she wants to see. She lives in lies.

That is all half a day and a thousand kilometres behind me. In front of me is my past. In front of me is my identity. In front of me is the missing part of my soul.

There she is. Standing among the small group of people waiting for their friends and relatives to debark the bus.

My biological mother.

She's quite short, with long, wavy brown hair. I see myself in her eyes. She looks wonderful, because she is mine. She looks eager, hopefully because I am hers.

We make eye contact. I smile shyly and move towards her.

'Hello Pedro,' she says without hesitation and takes me into her arms.

'Hello Magdalena,' I reply and hug her back.

This is our first embrace. I relish it. I have never felt more alive, more human, more filled with emotion as my eyes well with tears of joy and relief.

Finally, the mother ship has arrived.