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Where You Belong

My brother Clarence bursts into my apartment with a huge smile on his face. He walks up to me, grabs my shoulders, and says, "I got the stuff."

My eyes widen. "You got the stuff?"

Clarence slings his backpack off his shoulders and opens it up. He pulls out a bottle labeled Boromite and shows it to me. I grin and stomp my feet in excitement. After 3 months of working, we finally found the last component we need to travel to a parallel universe.

"Diana and Chris are on their way over. I texted them before I got here." Clarence tells me.

"Good. We'll need them to help us put the finishing touches on the portal." I walk over to my laptop and open up the program I've been working on that will open the portal to a parallel universe. I've been working on this with Diana for months. We've been reading all this theory about travelling to parallel universes and about the experiments that have already been done. A group of scientists was able to open a portal to a parallel universe, but no one travelled through it. As far as we know, this is the only time anyone has opened a portal to a parallel universe. A lot of the information about this experiment is secret, but Diana and I were able to combine what we knew about that experiment with the theory we've been reading to come up with a way to open our own parallel universe. You need some kind of physical machine to harness the power, but you also need a computer program that can tell the machine what to do. Based on the theory we've read, in the multiverse, all universes are stacked up next to each other. The only thing separating them is what scientists call a reality shield, which keeps all of these different realities from bleeding into each other. I think I've created a program that will tear a hole in the reality

shield, and then we'll be able to travel to the parallel universe that's right next to ours. Boromite is the element we need to be able to break down the shield between the two universes. I don't completely know how it works, but something about it's chemical composition paired with the machine we've built should punch a hole in the reality shield.

There's a knock on the door, and Clarence lets Diana and Chris in. I jump up and smile at the two of them. "Guys, we've got the stuff." Diana let's out a squeal, and Chris smirks. "Now all we need to do is finish building the machine, and I need to tweak the program a little bit."

"Sounds good." Clarence says. He gestures at Chris to help him with the machine, and Diana goes with them. Over the next few hours, we finish up and plan to start testing in the morning.

I wake up to the sound of someone opening my front door. I quickly get out of bed and grab scissors from my desk. I creep out of my bedroom and look around for the intruder.

"Scissors, seriously?" I jump and spin to face where the voice came from. I scrunch my eyebrows and scream, "Clarence! You scared me. Why are you in my apartment?"

"Michelle, calm down. I wanted to come work on the machine, but I didn't want to wake you up." Then he smirks, "Did you really plan to take me out with a pair of safety scissors?"

I glare at him. "It's all I had in my room." Then I smile. "But I don't need scissors to take you down. I thought someone actually threatening was in my apartment."

Clarence rolls his eyes. "Yeah, right."

"Okay, whatever you say." I glance around me before charging at Clarence, attempting to tackle him to the ground. I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my head in his stomach, but he barely moves an inch. He starts laughing throws me off him. I start giggling and jump on his

back, trying to make him lose his balance. He stumbles back, and we both tumble to the ground, belly laughing as we hit the floor. I let go of Clarence and he rolls away from me.

“See, I told you I could take you.” I say through giggles.

“Yeah, yeah, you got lucky.” Clarence smiles and gives me a small punch in the arm.

“So, why are you really here?” I ask.

Clarence hesitates. “I think we should start testing the portal right now.”

“What about Diana and Chris. Shouldn’t we wait for them?” I ask.

“I’ll text them. But let’s get going. I really want to go see the parallel world.”

“Okay, sure. Pour the Boromite into the machine. I’ll boot up the system.” Clarence does this, and I open my laptop, type a few commands into the program, and press enter. Immediately the machine starts buzzing and a beam of light shoots out from it. It stops in the middle of the room and starts to make a circle in the air. The beam spirals inward until an orange vortex is in my living room.

Before I can process what’s happening, Clarence is standing right in front of the portal. He turns to me and says, “I’m going through.” Then he jumps in the portal and disappears.

“Clarence!” I scream. I get up and without thinking I chase him through the portal. My vision is overtaken by the swirling orange. The pressure inside the portal is intense, and my body feels like it’s being crushed. As soon as the trip started it ended, and I’m spit out into a new world.

I groan. When I open my eyes, I immediately throw up into the grass I landed in. As soon as my stomach is empty, I look around and see Clarence hunched over holding his head.

I shakily stand up, walk over to Clarence, and punch him in the arm. “What is wrong with you? Why in the world would you just jump through the portal like that. We haven’t done any tests yet. We had no way of knowing if it was safe to go through.”

“Sorry, sorry. I just got so excited. I mean, Michelle, we’re in a parallel universe.”

Clarence groans as he stands up.

I look around me and can’t help but smile. “I’m still a little mad at you, but this is really cool.”

“Now, you may think I didn’t plan anything, but I made sure to add enough Boromite to keep the portal open for 3 hours. That’s how much time we have here.” Clarence shows me his watch.

“Well at least you had some plan before you jumped through.” I pause. “What should we do first?”

“We should definitely try not to draw too much attention to ourselves. There’s a big possibility there are versions of us in this universe.” Clarence says.

“Good point. I guess let’s just start walking around. It looks like we landed in a park.”

Clarence and I start walking through the park and notice people picnicking and children playing. So far nothing is out of the ordinary.

“Hey, we’re pretty close to our neighborhood. We should go check it out. See if anything’s different.” Clarence says.

“I thought we were trying to not run into ourselves.” I say.

“We’ll be careful. I just want to check it out.”

“Fine, if you really want to.” I cross my arms.

We start walking towards our neighborhood, and I begin to realize how similar this universe is to my own. Mostly everything is the same, except for a few minor things here and there. For example, the sun and moon are both in the sky, and the moon is a lot bigger than normal. The trees have leaves shaped like stars, and when I touch one of them, I realize too late that they're sharp, and I prick my finger.

"Ow." I stick my finger in my mouth.

"Oh yeah, those'll get you." Clarence mutters.

"What?"

"Never mind." Clarence keeps walking.

As we get closer to our neighborhood, I start to feel anxious. Everything is so similar to our universe, and it doesn't seem right. I was expecting some huge difference between this universe and our own, so where is it?

Clarence and I arrive at our neighborhood, and my heart drops. Where there would normally be shops and restaurants in our universe, there is a cemetery here. I walk up to the entrance and read a sign. *This cemetery is for all those who died in the 2045 bombings. May they rest in peace.*

I cover my mouth with my hands. "Was there a war here?" I look to Clarence, and he has gone white.

"Clarence, what's wrong?"

He looks at me and says, "It's just... surprising, is all."

"I want to check it out." I start to walk through the gate, but Clarence grabs my arm.

"I'm not sure we should do that."

“What’s the harm in looking? I just want to see if we can find out anymore about what happened here.”

I pull away from Clarence and walk into the cemetery. Clarence reluctantly follows me, and we walk down the rows of gravestones until I find a name I recognize. My eyes widen and Clarence looks away. The tombstone reads: *Here lies Clarence Dupont. Love brother and son. 2037-2045.*

I look down at my feet and jump back in horror. “I was just standing over your dead body.” I gasp to Clarence.

Clarence grabs my shoulders. “No, Michelle, I’m right here. That’s a different Clarence. That’s not me.”

I look back at the tombstone. “You were 8-years-old when you died.”

“Michelle, look at me. That version of Clarence was 8. I’m right here.” He gently turns my head towards him.

“You were killed in the bombings. Do you think that means I’m in here too? And our parents?”

“I don’t know. But I think we should leave.” Clarence grabs my hand and pulls me toward the front gate. I don’t know why it struck me so much. It’s not like my actual brother was under there. Who knows, that version of Clarence could have been completely different. I may not have even recognized him. I look at my brother. He didn’t seem too bothered by seeing his name on a tombstone. Was he just acting strong for me? Or did it really not affect him?

I push these thoughts away as we head out of the cemetery gates. Clarence continues across the street and into our neighborhood.

“Clarence, please. Why are we going into our neighborhood?” He doesn’t answer me.

We turn the corner onto our street and start walking toward this universe's version of my house. I look at Clarence, and his face is contorted into what looks like both a smile and a grimace.

We arrive at my house, and Clarence sighs. "It still looks the same."

"Clarence, what are you talking about. This house is stone. Our house is brick." I look at him with confusion. "Clarence are you okay?"

He turns to face me with tears in his eyes. "Michelle, I need to tell you something."

Before he can say another word, the front door of the house opens and two people who look like my mom and dad walk out, but I know it's not really them. Clarence whips around and the two of them gasp.

The woman says, "Michelle, what's going on?"

Clarence ignores this question and puts a hand on his chest, saying, "Mom, it's me. Clarence."

I am completely confused as I walk to stand next to Clarence. "What are you talking about? That's not our mom."

Clarence gives me a sad smile but doesn't answer. He walks towards the man and the woman, but I grab his arm. "Clarence, what's going on?"

He turns to me and says, "Michelle, I... I'm home. This is my home."

I squint my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. "Clarence, are you confused? We travelled to a parallel universe."

Clarence sighs. "Just, come here." He leads me to the man and woman.

"Clarence, is that really you?" The woman reaches out to him.

Clarence grabs her hand and says, "Yeah, mom. I'm home."

She pulls Clarence into a hug and the man wraps his arms around them too. I stand awkwardly next to them, trying to figure out what's going on.

Clarence breaks out of the hug and turns to me. "Michelle, I never wanted you to know this, but I'm actually from this universe. This is my real home. These are my real parents."

I stumble back. "What are you talking about? We saw the gravestone for this universe's Clarence. And if that's true, that would mean my real brother is..." Bile from my stomach rises to my throat, and Clarence places his hands on my shoulders to steady me. I brush him off, and anger flares in my chest.

"Then why were you in my universe? What happened to my real brother?" I look at the three of them.

"Your brother died when he was 8." Clarence tries to grab my hands, but I don't let him.

"Is he buried here?" Tears start rolling down my cheeks.

"I don't think so." Clarence says. "I think his body is still in your universe."

I turn to Clarence's parents. "Why did you think he died? Does it have something to do with the bombings?"

Clarence's parents grimace. His mom says. "Yes. Back in 2045 there were several terrorist attacks around the United States. In this town alone, there were three bombings, and one of them was at Clarence's elementary school. We just assumed that he was killed because he was never found." Clarence's mom starts crying. "But now he's home, 13 years later."

"But what I still don't understand is where you were." Clarence's dad says. "What happened?"

"Well, I actually skipped school that day." Clarence sighs. "Mom walked me to school and dropped me off, I waited a few minutes, and then I walked home. I was really nervous about

a spelling test I had, and I didn't want to take it. I hid in the bushes by our neighbor's house until I was sure you two had left for work, then I used our spare key to get inside."

"But then what? How did you get to my universe?" I ask.

"I'll tell you all what I know." Clarence sighs.

I run through the house, excited that I managed to skip school without anyone noticing.

"This is going to be awesome! I can't wait to tell Michelle about it." I fist pump in the air and barrel into the kitchen, looking for snacks.

I stand on my tiptoes and open the cabinet, looking at the assortment of chips that we have. As I'm about to reach for a bag, I notice a light out of the corner of my eye. I turn to see a swirling orange portal. "Woah." My eyes widen and I walk toward it. "What is this thing?" I reach my hand out to touch it, and then I feel something invisible tugging on me. I lose my footing, and I tumble into the portal, screaming.

After a few seconds of being thrust around, I'm spit out onto the ground and immediately throw up. Once I've regained control of my stomach, I look up to see a group of people in lab coats looking down at me.

"Who are you?" I ask. "Where am I?"

A woman kneels down and looks me in the eye. "It's okay sweetheart. We're just going to take you home. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"But how did I get here?" I squint my eyes. "I was just home."

"That's not important. We're just going to take you back home."

"Is this because I skipped school? Am I in trouble?" I can't help but wonder if this happens to every kid that skips school.

“No, you’re not in trouble.” The woman reaches out her hand. I take it, and she leads me outside to a car. I get into the backseat, and the woman and a man get in the front.

A few minutes later, the car turns into my neighborhood, except that it isn’t exactly my neighborhood.

“Hey, why are all the houses made of brick?” I wave my hands at the man and woman, but they don’t pay attention.

The car pulls up to a house that looks a lot like mine, and the man and woman get out of the car. The woman tells me to get out, and I listen. Then we walk up to the front door.

The man knocks, and two people that look like my parents open the door. My mom starts crying, and my dad covers his mouth with his hand.

My parents start asking the man and woman questions, but they won’t answer until I go inside. My mom and dad tell me to go to my room and that they will come up soon. I listen, go to my room, and sit on my bedspread that is now blue instead of green. I walk up to my dresser and stare and my pet fish that is now a pet hamster. I have no clue what just happened, but I guess things are okay.

At this point, I’ve sat down on the steps leading up to the front door of my parallel universe house to make sure I didn’t fall over. Clarence is sitting next to me, and his parents are sitting across from us on the sidewalk. Clarence’s mom is still crying, and his dad looks shocked.

Clarence puts a hand on my shoulder and says, “When I got older, your mom and dad told me why I had been brought to your universe. After your brother died, your parents were in extreme grief. You were only 5 at the time, so you probably don’t really remember all of this. Instead of telling you that your brother died, they told you he went on a trip and would be back

soon. They didn't know how to tell you the truth. Then, they saw an advertisement for a company that claimed to have a new method for getting rid of grief. They decided to check it out, and the people there told them that they could fix all their problems. Your parents agreed to pay the company to help them, and then a few days later I showed up at their door. When I was told to go to my room, your parents asked what they had done. The man and woman told your parents that they had taken me from a parallel universe and that I would be a replacement for their dead son. They said that they do this for people who have lost someone all the time. It's a great way for them to keep improving their parallel universe machine while also helping people who've lost someone."

I interrupt Clarence and say, "So, what did my mom and dad do after they found this out?"

"Well, I think they told the man and woman to send me back. They didn't think it was fair that I be taken from my real family to help them get over their grief. The man and woman said no and left. So, I was trapped in your universe, and your parents were stuck trying to figure out how to deal with their son being back from the dead. I decided early on that I would do everything I could to eventually get home to my real family and that I wouldn't tell you the truth because I didn't want to drag you into all of this."

"But I could have helped you!" I raise my voice. "Telling me earlier would have made things easier right now. I thought we were coming to this universe to have some fun, but you had planned this all along. You knew you were going to leave without saying goodbye to mom and dad."

“You think that wasn’t hard for me? Of course I started loving them as my own parents, and of course I started loving you as my real sister. But my real family is here, in this universe. Please Michelle. I really don’t want this to be difficult.”

“Well it is difficult. Clarence, you’re my brother. I don’t care that you’re from a parallel universe. You’re still my brother, and you’re also one of my best friends. I don’t want to lose you.” I take a deep breath. “I’m staying here, in this universe.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Clarence grimaces.

“And why not?” I ask.

“There’s already a Michelle in this universe. I’m not sure having two would work out very well.” Clarence doesn’t look me in the eye.

“I don’t care. I’ve made up my mind.” I say.

“But Michelle, you’ll be leaving behind your parents. I had to deal with that for 13 years and it was so hard. Do you really want to go through that?”

“Clarence, I’m not losing my brother twice. I’m not leaving.”

Clarence stares in my eyes and grinds his teeth. “You’re not going to change your mind?”

“Nope.” I say.

Clarence sighs, and then smiles. “Okay, we’ll work something out. You and this version of Michelle will probably get along.”

I give Clarence a big hug and squeal. “This is so cool. I get to live in a parallel universe.”

“We do need to make sure the portal closes though.”

“I thought it was on a timer and would close by itself.” I say.

“Well I don’t know that for sure. This is the first time we’ve travelled to a parallel universe after all. We should check to be sure.”

“Okay, I guess you’re right.”

Clarence tells his parents he’ll be back soon, and we start walking back to the portal.

“Clarence, this is actually pretty cool. You can show me all the parts about this universe that are different.”

“Yeah, I can definitely do that.” He pauses. “Hey Michelle, I bet I can beat you back to the portal.”

“Oh, you are so on!” I say. “Ready, set...” Before I say “go” I start sprinting, leaving Clarence behind me.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Clarence laughs from behind me.

I keep sprinting back to where the portal is, but Clarence is gaining on me. He gets closer and closer until he grabs my shirt and pulls me back. Then he passes me up. “You jerk!” I smile and try to catch up to him. I sprint harder than I have in a while until I’m next to him again. We keep sprinting until we see the portal. I push myself, take the lead, and beat him to it.

“Yes! I’m the fastest. I beat you. I am the superior sibling!” I taunt him.

Clarence hunches over to catch his breath. Then he gives me a thumbs up. “Great job Michelle. You are the superior sibling.”

I look at the swirling orange portal. “So, what now? Do we just need to wait to make sure it closes?”

“Yep, and it looks like we have about 10 seconds left. 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4...” Clarence trails off. Then I feel him put his hand on my back and he says, “I love you Michelle. I’ll miss you.” Then he shoves me through the portal. At the last second, I turn and see his sad face watching me. I try to reach out and grab him, but the portal has already sucked me in. I relive the familiar

tossing and turning of the portal and within seconds I'm spit back into my apartment. The second I hit the ground the portal closes behind me.

I jump to my feet and stomp to where the portal was. I scream and clench my fists. Tears start falling from my eyes, and I turn on my laptop. I'll just open the portal again. There might be some Boromite left in the machine. Maybe Clarence didn't pour it all in.

I rapidly type on my keyboard and start booting up the system again. Before I get too far though, my computer crashes.

"Ugh." I slam my fists on the table. I just lost my brother for the second time, and I didn't even know I lost him the first time. He may as well have died today because I'll probably never see him again. The tears start coming harder and faster, and I slide out of my chair. I look to where the portal was and cover my face with my hands. After a few moments of sobbing, I stand up and walk to my front door. I need to get out of this apartment. I step outside, and as I close the door I feel a small bit of comfort. While I didn't meet her, there is a version of me in Clarence's universe. I hope she's happy to see him again.