

THE MALL

by Evan Kahn

Around three in the morning, somewhere in the midway of the Steinman Family's Great Trip To Grandma's Canadian Retirement Home, a shiny 2014 Chrysler Pacifica became lost in the St. Croix State Park.

The roads were serpentine and ill-kept, and in the darkness the forest looked the same for miles. But the minivan's all-wheel drive and stellar anti-lock braking brought an understated sense of comfort and stability to its occupants, not least since Eric, the driver, was coasting on four hours of sleep and had already punched the cruise control up to seventy-five. The light snow that had been falling for hours grew dense, blanketing the hood of the car with thicker and heavier layers as the wipers emptied the windshield. Eric noticed that the fuel meter was showing about twenty miles of range remaining; soon they would need to find somewhere to stop.

A cry of pain came from the backseat. Eric preferred the kids to be asleep at this point on a trip, but he had given up that hope at a rest stop around hour three, when Teddy had stolen one of the energy drinks from the second tier of cup holders that folded out from the left of the driver's side front seat. That might have been all right, but Abby had refused to get back into the car until she had her own and James had followed suit, which (Eric thought at the time) didn't bode well for the future.

Sara was asleep, so this conflict was his to field. Staring pointedly at the road ahead, Eric threw his voice so that the kids would think he was looking back and might crash the car at any moment, a skill he had been practicing in secret for several months.

"Teddy, Abby, I don't have the energy for this right now."

His daughter piped up.

“Teddy punched me in the *face!*”

Teddy, the youngest, responded: “She started texting my girlfriend from my phone while I was asleep!”

James, the eldest, was amused enough to remove his headphones and raise an eyebrow, then respond:

“Ted, you’re thirteen. You don’t have a girlfriend.”

Teddy was indignant. “Haven’t you met her? We got together after she saw me shirtless at crew practice! We’ve been on three dates!”

Every occupant of the car except Teddy and his sleeping mother rolled their eyes.

James giggled, a habit that embarrassed him as unbecoming of his adult self. “Did you share a milkshake after the movie last weekend? Did you ever get to hold hands?”

Teddy fumed. “Just because *your* girlfriend hated you so much she changed schools!”

Eric shook his head. “Guys, please, I just can’t deal with this right –”

He was overruled by a deluge of obscenity and violence from the backseat and made a mental note not to bring children on future road trips.

The snow came down harder, blanketing the roads ahead and obscuring all but those closest to the car. Chicago was well in the rear-view mirror, but Winnipeg was hours away. They hadn’t stopped for gas since around nine P.M; sometime before Madison. Prompted by the steady *blink blink* of the fuel light, Eric gently nudged his wife, who shifted in her reclined seat and mumbled:

“What’s going on?”

“We’re out of gas, I can’t see, and there’s nowhere to pull over in these woods.”

“When did we fill the tank last?”

“About six hours ago.”

“Eric, you couldn’t have filled the tank before we went into this forest? Are you trying to strand us out here before we make it to Winnipeg?”

“Look, honey, I wanted to make it a straight shot and I knew that the first rest stop we hit” — here he jerked his head in the direction of Teddy — “we’d end up dropping thirty dollars on a claw game.”

From the backseat drifted a word that Eric *knew* that Abby had been forbidden from using, and he was compelled to turn his head at last. “Abby, if I hear you say that again...!”

Sara’s hand clamped onto his shoulder and he swiveled back to face the road, which took an abrupt pivot into an icy hairpin turn. He jerked the wheel and the car careened around the bend. As the Chrysler’s award-winning anti-lock braking activated, the violent screeching of its tires subdued and it skidded down the icy abandoned road to an uneasy stop.

The backseat was quiet for a few moments.

“What the *hell* was that, Dad!” James breathed.

Rattled, they took stock of themselves. Sara had had enough.

“Eric, we won’t make it through tonight. But we need to get the kids to Mom, so let’s find a place to sleep and keep driving as soon as it’s safe.”

Eric relented. “Okay. We’ll pull over as soon as we find a house and ask if we can park outside and sleep in the car.”

He restarted the engine and continued the drive. The road straightened out and the woods receded.

Eric was surprised but relieved to see bright lights off the side of the road, beckoning the car towards a turnoff. There was a bumpy transition from unkempt dirt to immaculate asphalt, prompting Sara and the kids to look up from their phones.

The paved road progressed for a quarter-mile, illuminated by clean, modern streetlights, and at its end the Pacifica rolled onto the edge of an enormous circular parking lot. Seen from above it would have resembled a galaxy: a brilliant, multicolored building was ringed by perhaps two thousand cars, pointing radially inwards and wrapped around it to form a vast spiral. Eric noticed parked cars to his front and left and slowed to a stop, wondering how he would be able to find a parking spot; noticing white lines on the asphalt out either window, he realized he was already sitting in one. Well past the point of questioning the building's bizarre parking system, he killed the engine, let out a deep breath, and took stock of his surroundings.

The central building sat beyond twenty concentric rows of cars; it was squat and round, about a story tall. A brilliant, curved electronic billboard wrapped around the outer surface of the cylinder, its expanse interrupted by the large double door aligned to the Steinmans' parking space. Lavish video advertisements danced across its surface.

The kids had taken off their seatbelts. Abby spoke.

“Is this... is this a mall?”

The sky was dark and the snow was still falling, so they walked across the lot through rows of cars towards the building.

Despite being layered with snow, the occasional car was occupied by a tired-looking man or woman. Many read or smoked cigarettes. Teddy, darting between cars and tapping on

windows, tried several times to get the attention of their occupants, but each time his presence went unacknowledged.

As they approached the center of the lot, Eric spotted some immaculate vintage cars – even as a child, he couldn't recall ever having seen a '58 T-bird this pristine. He wouldn't have taken the middle-aged woman doing needlepoint in the driver's seat for a gearhead, either. *Maybe she's a queer, he thought, or it's her husband's.*

His thoughts were interrupted when the family arrived at the silver double doors, squinting to counteract the glare from the advertising. Eric was numb. *It's three thirty A.M., he thought. What if they're closed and we walked all this way for nothing.* But Teddy had already darted into the building, and the rest of the family filed in after him. Eric brought up the rear, still baffled.

The doors opened onto an enormous, marble-floored circular space; the inner curved wall was covered with the same electronic billboards as the outer one. A railing, concentric in the circular space and starting about fifteen feet in from the outer doors, delineated the walkable area of the plaza as a narrow ring. Video ads for restaurants and clothing outlets flickered across the massive displays. *Armani: Fourth Floor*, blared one, replete with beaming, coiffed model. *Wells Fargo: Eighth Floor. Stores open all hours. Get your Super Shopper Wristband today.* The kids inched towards the center of the space, transfixed by the shimmering tableau of commercials and name brands. Teddy was first to recover.

“There's a Dave and Buster's on the fifth floor!”

It already seemed like such a long time since they had been outside, but Eric recalled it to be a one-story building. “*Is there even a fifth floor?*”

Teddy darted forwards to the railing, peering over the edge. “Dad...”

Eric looked over the railing into an enormous, cylindrical atrium below. Eight ring-shaped plazas were built into the outer wall, vertically spaced one story apart, each with its own inner railing overlooking the next. They grew smaller with depth but stayed centered around the same midpoint, meaning that the entire area of every one of the plazas was visible from his vantage point on the first floor. Each plaza had storefronts, bustling with shoppers, arranged around its outer edge. Every storefront displayed a logo on its flat roof, guaranteeing that a single observer looking down from the ground-floor could locate any business in the mall. Escalators connecting consecutive floors spiraled into the inverted cone, like the threads on an enormous screw, and glass catwalks stretched from each plaza's edge to its center, where a single transparent elevator tube sprouted from the bottom floor up through the center of each plaza.

Eric caught his breath. "I guess they mean the fifth floor down."

James was zipping his headphones back into his backpack. "Dad... what are we going to do here? There's nowhere to sleep."

Eric shrugged, still exhausted. Sara spoke up, decisive.

"We need to get back on the road as soon as it's safe, so let's all meet back up here at six. If you need us, your father and I will be finding something to eat."

The family dispersed, eager to explore, while Teddy lingered on the surface, taking in the concentric palette of logos and storefronts. The third floor was ringed by fast-food restaurants; it served as an enormous, central food court for the entire mall.

Further down, half of the fifth floor plaza was taken up by a colossal, semicircular swimming pool; the other half featured a variety of sports bars and video arcades. He located the Dave and Buster's among them and decided to head there first.

He stepped onto the first of four escalators, scowling down at the pool and thumbing the three \$20 bills in his wallet. Dad had refused to raise his allowance – again! – and he had just lost the source of income after being let go from his lifeguarding job.

I could go back to the outdoor pool this summer. There the head lifeguard just pays you to sit and not talk about the time you came by at night and caught him smoking a joint behind the front desk, because he wants to get into Rice and he's a legal adult now and he's sure that all the good colleges run background checks. Teddy recalled his wiry middle-school frame towering over the oleaginous limp noodle of eighteen-year-old, stoned as hell and sobbing incoherently at the thought of going to jail, and felt a little better.

The Dave and Buster's was crowded with men, skewing middle-aged. Teddy noticed that they all wore bright green Super Shopper wristbands; he'd noticed some shoppers wearing those in some of the stores he had passed and he wondered what sorts of benefits they conferred.

Teddy pushed past a heavyset repairman fixing the lighted logo in the foyer, converted two of the twenties into tickets, and dived into the fray. He was glad to see that arcades still kept light gun shooters. The console titles had much better violence these days, but young as he was he still harbored nostalgia for the games on which he cut his teeth before the Xbox of two Christmases ago. And he wouldn't ever get tired of the catharsis from pulling a real trigger and watching pixelated heads explode into gory digital confetti.

He'd almost cleared the first chapter boss when the game glitched and sent him back to the beginning, burning another five tickets. It crashed again on his next attempt, just before a checkpoint. Furious, he stepped back and turned to find another perennial favorite: the claw machine. The top prize was a little card you could redeem for an iPad, which would tide him over throughout the rest of the car ride as his laptop battery had died.

Teddy maneuvered the claw with unwavering skill, each repeated attempt bringing him a little closer to his prize. Each time it dropped, grasping at emptiness then returning to its neutral position to release a nonexistent payout, Teddy felt his allowance dribbling away.

He was down to his last ticket when the claw managed to seize the redemption card. It ascended and moved to the prize return box, hovering over it for an instant before dropping the card. It landed just adjacent to the return hole and the claw reset.

Teddy fumed, and a fortysomething sitting at the sports bar turned towards him, expression sympathetic.

“You lose every time.”

Teddy swiveled. “What?”

The man grinned, pulling at a graying ponytail. “You can’t win any of the games here. You just keep fighting forever.”

It took Teddy a moment to comprehend this. “Everything is rigged!”

The man nodded.

Numb with wrath, Teddy pushed through the milieu of gamers back to the entrance and grabbed the hammer from the handyman at the front entrance. Sprinting back to the claw machine through the path he’d cleared, he swung the hammer one, two, three times, cracking shattering dispersing the front glass, and reached in to retrieve the iPad redemption card, tiny cuts stinging his wrist and arm. Seething, he composed himself and walked back to the ticket counter, slapping the card down and glaring at the freckled teenager manning the register.

Their gazes met.

“Hi Teddy. Would you like a Super Shopper wristband?”

Still nursing a strawberry shake from the food court Dairy Queen, Abby headed down the escalator to the fourth floor, which was peppered with expensive retail. She couldn't wait to begin exploring the shopping down here – she had a penchant for hanging out in the Armani in downtown Chicago, but as a sixteen-year-old with a modest allowance you couldn't mingle for too long before being escorted out by a concierge. Almost every time she'd visited back home she'd witnessed some outrageous purchase; a flawless young professional would ring up ten thousand dollars' worth of jackets or shoes and stride out, offspring or assistant clutching the extra bags. The radiance and audacity associated with such wealth was intoxicating, even secondhand as it swept by; pretending to check out a skirt or a bag by the door, Abby would often lean in to taste a lingering trace of expensive fragrance.

She wanted to talk to them; to see the chauffeured cars into which they stepped; the sprawling driveways and living rooms and garages where they parked. *These things give me power*, she imagined them saying, *and if you want any of it you're going to going to have to get on your knees and beg.*

This mall's Armani was sandwiched between a Rolex and an Apple Store, much the same as the one in Chicago. Abby stood near an intimidating rack of skirts and began checking out the clientele. Self-conscious, she played with a long thread coming loose from the hem of her blouse.

A slim girl in an ill-fitting hoodie, with dark curls and a thin, somber face, waited next to a display as a store associate returned to hand her a folded brown dress. The girl, close to Abby's age, lacked the cold imperviousness that radiated from Armani clientele. She had yet to learn how to be rich; maybe it could be teased out of her.

Abby managed to catch her gaze and decided to open with a compliment.

“That dress looks so nice!”

She was met with a small smile, so she pressed on.

“How much does it cost?”

Abby regretted the words before they left her mouth; she realized how petty and poor they made her seem. The other girl replied.

“Two thousand dollars. But it looks great on me.”

Abby reeled silently. “Steal it!” she managed, hoping the joke would make up for something.

“I don’t steal anymore,” replied the girl. She left for the changing room.

She emerged minutes later, radiant. The dress was a perfect, if unassuming, accent: dark (matching her hair), plain and unadorned, it hugged her striking figure, accentuating the dramatic sweeping arc of her shoulder blades and the subtle, fluid camber of her breasts. Her downcast brown eyes stood out against her thin, bare neck. Even the garish fluorescent wristband she wore managed to highlight the earthy tones of the garment.

The girl was beautiful beyond description, and Abby despised her for it.

“How do you wear that the way you do?”

“I come here every day to try it on.”

“Why not just buy it?”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Could you save?”

“I don’t have any money.”

Confused and angry, Abby looked the girl over again from her satiny hair to her perfect knees to the sculpted arches of her sneakered feet. Then she took the lid off the cup with the

remnants of her strawberry milkshake and threw its contents at the girl, spattering the magnificent dress. She turned and sprinted towards the exit without a word.

Before she crossed the threshold the concierge smiled, told her to have a great day, and offered her a complimentary Super Shopper wristband.

James had a fake ID, so he decided to kill some time in the bar on the second floor. He was on his third beer when a girl walked by outside. She had a graceful, athletic build and a genial face framed by short blonde hair. He waved at her from his table and smiled, pretending they knew each other, and hoping she might mistake him for a friend.

It had been a while since he had been with someone. His last girlfriend didn't want to talk to him after their relationship had fallen apart. She stopped responding to his texts asking what was wrong and transferred schools a few months later.

He didn't understand women. It frustrated him. He felt empty.

He was surprised but pleased to see her enter the bar and sit down his table. They hadn't carded him, so he bought her drinks and they chatted about nothing for a while. She worked at the movie theater and could get them free tickets to some slasher movie that he was sure Teddy would have liked. She would sometimes pause in the middle of a sentence and play with her wristband for a few moments. James thought she looked sad about something but he couldn't be sure. He didn't care too much.

They took the elevator down to the theater on the seventh floor and sat through the movie. It was scary but they both enjoyed themselves. During the tensest moments he would try to hold her hand but she pulled back when he reached out to touch it.

Am I repulsive?

The movie finished and they went back to the bar and had a few more cheap beers. About two hours had passed. Soon, James realized, he would have to be on his way. He asked for her number. She changed the subject, polite but firm.

Why is she leading me on?

A chilly wind blew through the bar and he pulled her close, wrapping his arm around her waist. She excused herself to use the ladies' room.

Maybe she just doesn't want to be in a relationship right now.

That was okay. James headed back to the restrooms, peered in to make sure no one else was inside, and slipped through the door as she emerged from her stall. He pushed her up against the grimy corrugated metal, probing her mouth with fierce kisses — closing his eyes so he couldn't see her expression.

She wants this. She just doesn't know how to tell me. His fingers tightened around her buttocks.

He broke the kiss and looked at her for a split second, too little time to know what she might be thinking; then he mumbled a goodbye and strode out of the bathroom. He hoped she had thought it was all right.

She didn't come out after him, so he went to pay his tab. The bartender offered him a complimentary wristband.

Eric pushed around a scrap of filet mignon in the steakhouse on the fourth floor, studying Sara's face. They had already paid the check.

She looked up at him and he looked away.

“The nursing home is expecting us between eleven and one,” she said.

He pointed out through the glass walls at one of the billboards, visible even four stories up. “It says the snow stopped outside.”

She pushed herself away from the table. “Mom getting to meet the kids will be pretty surreal.”

He nodded again.

Her phone buzzed and she took it out of her pocket.

“That *bitch!*”

“Hm?”

She turned her phone to show him the text message she had received from her sister.

“Jenn is also driving her kids out to the nursing home today. She must have heard that we were going. She says she’s ‘looking forward to seeing us after all these years’.”

Eric exhaled.

“Sara, Jenn’s family lives just outside Winnipeg. She sees your mom every year. They must also know about her diagnosis.”

Sara fiddled with the wristband that came with the check. “Why else would she drive out the same day as us, if not to remind Mom who her favorite daughter is? She knows we’re there for just a few hours, and she must know why we’re going.” She put her phone back into her pocket and stood up, indignant. “Jenn just wants to make sure she’s watching us when we talk to Mom about the will. We need to head out now.”

Eric set down his wineglass and got up from his chair. “Your mom will be happy to talk about the inheritance no matter who is in the room.”

Sara glared at him. “We’ll see.” They thanked the *maître d’* and headed towards the exit.

Sara tried to follow Eric through the open glass door, but her foot met an invisible resistance as she tried to step across the threshold onto the fourth-floor plaza. “Eric?”

He looked at her, questioning.

She pressed an open palm flat against an invisible barrier, then, panic increasing, slammed her fist against it. Her Super Shopper wristband glowed, pulsing with each silent impact. The patrons of the restaurant had stopped eating and turned as one to face Sara, their gazes leaden. “Eric, I can’t leave.”

He tried to comprehend the situation but couldn’t. “Okay. I’ll go find help.”

He ran out to the central railing and checked his watch, staring straight up at the empty ground floor plaza. It was six A.M. on the nose and the kids were not there.

They’re all trapped inside.

Eric tried to feel terror, but an unexpected emotion appeared in its absence: relief.

After all these years, he could get away from his family forever: his greedy wife, his jealous daughter. His psychopathic sons.

No one in this mall can get out. His car was still parked outside. They could rot here forever and he could be on a plane off to Mexico before anyone would miss them. The cost of living was lower there. He could get a consulting job; maybe learn to paint. Drink bottomless margaritas. Date exotic women.

Just outside his field of view from inside the Armani, Abby hammered the glass wall with her fists to get Eric’s attention. No sound escaped.

The central elevator, already stopped on his floor, would be his fastest way out. He strode across the glass catwalk and stepped inside. He pressed the 1 button, but it didn't light. The doors slid shut.

The button for the ninth floor lit instead. Eric's stomach lurched as the elevator dropped.

As it passed through the bottom floor of the atrium the bright interior lighting converged to a pinhole at the top of the shaft. It vanished soon thereafter and the elevator fell for several minutes in near complete darkness. *The shaft must be traveling straight through the bedrock.*

The descent stopped and the doors slid open. Eric stepped out into an empty supermarket, with intermittent fluorescents illuminating shelves of graying produce. The oppressive stench of rotting meat filled the air. The elevator door slid closed behind him.

The shelves went as far as he could see in every direction, their homogeneity broken only by the elevator shaft and a garage-sized aluminum structure a few aisles down. Dazed, he walked over to it and pressed his hand against it. The surface was bitterly cold, and when he retracted his hand it left a dark, wet print. He noticed the outline of a door on the front face.

It's a walk-in freezer.

The door swung silently ajar. Eric heard a low rumble from somewhere.

Bewildered, he stepped inside.