

**Waukesha Reads – The Big Read
Flash Fiction Contest
Adult Division Runner-up
Margeaux Chudy**

Crazy Summer

You know those people on city streets you instinctively try to avoid? The ones who, with one glance, you immediately know are crazy? Maybe they're talking to themselves, or pushing a kidnapped grocery cart full of junk, or wearing strange and dirty clothes with no sense of embarrassment. Social short-hand for "stay away." And so you stay away, and in your lintless khakis and with your name-brand coffee, the crazies also somehow know to stay away from you too. They knew to stay away from me, until today.

Tuesday went downhill as soon as I realized, after arriving at work, that I'd forgotten to call my mom back for two days in row. As long as we talk occasionally, she's okay, but if she ever calls and I don't respond that day - look out. It was busy at the senior living center where I work in IT, so I spent the morning with a seemingly endless string of grandmothers talking into my earpiece, trying to understand how to work their tablets and cell phones. There was something else too that I was forgetting, I was sure of it. The thought pestered me like a hair in my eye that I couldn't dig out no matter how hard I tried.

I determined to walk to the library over my lunch break and try to calm myself down with a new book. Since I was a little girl my preferred method of decompressing was reading. The expansive lawn in front of the library was a March shade of yellowish-green and, near the sidewalk that snaked across it, I found a bench. As soon as I sat

down, but before I could dial my mom, a man stepped off the city bus that had just pulled up beside the building and approached my perch. He ambled, but I assumed his only walking style was ambling, and my hope that he wasn't planning on joining me was short-lived.

He looked straight into my eyes as he took a seat in the middle - not at the far end - of the bench. I considered simply getting up and walking away but dammit, I needed to call my mom. Surely he would leave me alone if I was on the phone anyway. I grabbed my phone and began dialing.

"I don't remember seeing you here before."

I couldn't conceal the way I jumped when he spoke to me. He was a tall, gaunt man with broad shoulders and unkempt blond dreadlocks, but his voice had the girlish rasp of a teenager's. And the strangest thing was, his tone wasn't menacing or provocative - it was convivial, as if he expected to make a new friend. That something I was forgetting itched in my mind.

"Well, I haven't been here...before," I answered dumbly.

"I come here everyday. Good sunny place to pass the afternoon. You should too."

"I have a job. It's lunchtime."

He gave me the sort of incredulous look you might give a little child who claimed to have enough money to buy dinner for the family.

"Do you have food then?" he said.

"Well no, I was going to..."

I almost said, “buy something” - but I didn’t want to draw attention to my purse and the money inside. Where was it, anyway? Hadn’t I just taken my phone out of it? No, the phone had been in my pocket. I must have left my purse at work, dammit. He laughed amiably.

“It’s alright. Although the staff here is pretty strict about things if you pester people going to the library.” I had no idea what he was talking about, so I decided to just call my mom. Once I started talking to her, everything usually seemed fine.

“Around 12:20, usually, a guy pulls up to the intersection here and he’s just come through the McDonald’s drive-through and he buys an extra burger for me. You can have some if you like.” My phone rang and rang and Dreadlocks’ eyes kept looking at me questioningly, wondering why I was so reticent about the Big Mac.

“Why are you talking to me?” I hissed at him, the phone’s endless ringing putting me on edge.

He stood and huffed. “No need to be proud, just wanted to be friendly. I try to help out - my sister taught me to be kind, back before she started whoring herself out and dragging me along, and I...” he kept mumbling to himself as he headed off across the grass towards his lucky intersection.

“Becky?” My mom’s voice on the other end of the line, frantic.

“I just had the weirdest experience - a homeless person being charitable towards me. I’m glad you answered...he’s finally leaving me alone now.”

“Where are you? Why haven’t you called?” Why was she always such a basket-case?

“I’m at the library, Mom. Relax. It was a busy weekend.”

“The library? I was just there with Jacquelyn looking for you yesterday. They said they hadn’t seen you.”

“Who said they hadn’t seen me? Why didn’t you just call? God, Mom, you and your friends are ridiculous.”

“Friends? Becky, this is your worst yet. Jacquelyn’s in school now. She hasn’t seen her mom all summer. Where have you been? Work called and told me you had been terminated for not showing up. Why haven’t you been answering my calls?”

That thing I was forgetting seemed big enough to crush me all of a sudden, and I pulled my phone away from my face for a moment. There on the screen, a picture of me - it was me - and a little girl - Jacquelyn - my daughter. I looked down at my arm and noticed a constellation of bruised veins just hidden by the edge of a sweater that was much rattier than I remembered. My head hurt, as if I was being sucked whole out of a deep fissure.

“Mom?” The phone slipped against my sweaty face. “Can you come get me?”