

## **Pressed-Pennies**

By: Viji Rajaratnam

I stop blinking.

Natalie is dangling the “ALEXANDER MURRAY 1992 ‘BRUICHLADDICH’” off the edge of our scratched-up folding table. The Lucida Blackletter font winks at me just before she drops it onto the dock. As the glass breaks, crescent-shaped shards bow to the whiskey gushing outwards. The cracking bottleneck spits out flecks of burgundy-amber into the sun’s glare.

I grab at the suspended globs of drink. Streaks of fading gold repel my index and third fingers, exploding fireworks around my hands. I can direct the floating whiskey in blobby circles, like an unsteady cursor in Paint. I breathe it in. Try to sustain its notes of toffee-soaked cereal grains and ground tobacco, wafted scent mixed in with dewy grass and lake spray. Aged 21 years. Passing leaves get caught mid-furl in the vacuumed air, singed ends curved inwards like hanging quotation marks.

I can stop time. But freezing a moment doesn’t hold everything still. Blades of grass get smeared together into inky swirls. Even the hillside bonfire starts to look like sketched lines on a two-dimensional plane, the smoke like smudged charcoal filling in the white space.

I face away from the embers to keep my eyes from burning. The heat presses into my left eye. The twitches start in my right, tempting my drooping eyelids. My eyes are watering, blurring the spilled whiskey into a hilly spread over splintered dock planks. The rising foam blends into the spiked, gunmetal bottle cap.

I’m losing my hold on the moment. The blood orange and cinnamon hints of whiskey dilute like gum, when its flavor goes stale and the motion of chewing cramps your jaw. My neck struggles to hold my

head up. Nausea is gnawing at my throat and cheekbones. I slump back onto the hill next to Nat and grab fistfuls of unkempt lawn grass.

I blink.

The airborne leaves shuffle back into rhythm as the returning blaze, crackles, and warmth of the bonfire flush my face. The bottle shatters.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry, Ria. I didn’t mean to drop it!”

My ringing ears muffled out Nat’s squeals. I put a hand on my temples to calm the headache, and used the other to steady myself on her shoulder.

“It’s fine. I’m just gonna use the bathroom real quick.”

The floorboards creaked under my shifting footsteps, as I stumbled into the old half bath. The countertop’s stone texture tic-tac-toed my elbows. I twisted my right arm around to better inspect the marks it left, frowning at my indented skin. Lines ran down my elbows like outstretched claws. This last time-stop must have deepened the sags. I waited for the lukewarm water to get colder under my numbed fingertips.

A bulge in the seashell wallpaper caught my eye. I ran my thumb along the pattern, feeling it flake where the paper was peeling. The crumbled texture gave way around the lump. I teased out a pressed penny. The harsh “2002” engraving interrupted the rust crusted along its rim. A palm tree carving stretched out with the penny’s oval shape. I traced the fronds with wet fingers, as they gained back feeling.

I found Nat doubled over the crash site, scooping up the bottle shards in a clumsy scramble.

“Hey, so I cleaned up most of it. I don’t have enough right now to replace it, but I can write you a check as soon as we get back—”

“No, really. It’s okay, Nat. You can pay me back once you start getting that fancy lawyer income.”

“Heh, yeah. Assuming I hear back. Or if grad school doesn’t bankrupt me first.”

“Here, I’ll start the fund for you.”

I tossed her the pressed penny. She squinted at the etched symbols, holding the bleached face up to the light.

“Back before Cyprus Gardens became Legoland. Remember?”

“What? I don’t recognize this at all—”

“Ah, come on. Summer after fifth grade?”

“Sorry, not all of us have Whovian time-traveling skills.”

“It’s time-*stopping*, and nothing to do with your poor memory. The machine was broken and we almost didn’t get one. The last pressed penny before the park closed that night. Just found it stashed in my bathroom wallpaper.”

“You found it *in* the wall? No wonder your parents have had trouble selling the place.”

“Not enough trouble, they’ve got an interested buyer.”

“But, Ria. That’s good news.”

“You hungry?” I walked towards a discolored cooler by the bonfire and fished out a few patties, starting up the grill. She took her seat on a folding chair.

“Nothing sobers you up like a good burger.”

She scrunched up her nose at the sizzling grill.

“What?” I said.

“I don’t eat beef anymore.”

“Since when?”

“Gave it up when I sent in my application.”

“You really think claiming vegetarianism ups your chances?”

“I didn’t say all meat, just beef.”

“Well I hope you enjoy your salad over there.”

I wiped the sweat beading my forehead with my backhand, and took a gulp of ice water. I turned the solo cup around in my hands, inspecting the lip stick-stained rim where Nat had etched “Ria” in neat Sharpie handwriting.

I had always gone by ‘Valeria,’ a name my family liked to abuse by shouting through twisted hallways and cluttered rooms. When Nat first coined the nickname ‘Ria,’ I tried to slow the scene down, one of my early time-stop attempts. Opposing teams lined the middle-school gym for the annual dodge ball tournament. And she had announced, without hesitation faltering her voice, “I’ll take Ria.” Her speech was smoothed by confidence, lips caught in a light purse. But, I only thought to preserve the event after it had already passed, captured just the end of “Ria.” The long “ah” sound rang in my head as I paused it, a clipped echo and unfinished memory left to my imagination for replaying. No amount of straining would rewind.

She grabbed her black tote bag without warning, scrambling through its contents. Her shoulders tensed when she found her phone, the lit screen illuminating frown lines by her mouth.

“Sorry, it was a phantom vibration.”

I wipe my hands on my tattered jeans as I inspect her expression, still stealing glances at her phone. When I freeze her, she gets caught in the middle of a mustard-packet grab. She’s preferred mustard to ketchup ever since a town-fair turkey leg went wrong in the eighth grade. I’d tried convincing her that the food poisoning was more from the uncooked center, than the ketchup. But, she’d boycotted Heinz with a dorm-cabinet full of yellow packets.

Her body is pivoted away from me, revealing a small tear on the shoulder of her navy-blue blazer. I can see bits of thread poking out from behind the golden clasp she stitched on. Its polished glare competes with the remnants of last night’s bronzer, still splotched onto her face. She sits straight, as if jolted upright by the shock of an ice cube slithering down her spine. Her eyes are wider than normal, spotlighting her unwashed eye crust. A copy of *The Beginner’s Guide to Insight Meditation* sticks out of her open tote bag. A receipt to a set of graduation robes marks her place in the book. The creases in the cover reflect the lake’s paused ripples, lapping the dock in molded curves.

Our last trip to the family lake house had been in the sixth grade. We got out early that Friday before winter break. The bleep of the intercom and secretary’s nasal tone signaled a universal “Oooh” from the class. I used a time-stop to let their openmouthed faces sink in, glaring eyeballs and short attention spans privileging the classroom doodler and compulsive note-taker for a sweet three seconds. My time-stops used to come without wear, earning me the extra pause needed to strategize a number of kayak victories despite the steep competition (my two younger brothers, Nat, and her cousin). My eyes start burning again.

I blink.

Color restores Nat's cheeks, as I sip my water to disguise the oncoming nausea.

I said, "Look, why don't we go out on the jon boat. Just like we used to. You have plenty of time to be crabby and antisocial once you move to London."

"If they ever call me."

"They won't be calling you this second. You know what, leave your phone in the house."

A nest of moth eggs, speckled with pigeon droppings, rested on the mildewed tarp. Some of it spilled over into the seats. It took both of us to push the jon boat towards the waiting shore, wet gravel and crushed leaves dawdling the process. Barren tree trunks reached for the swirling sky, bent over like they were laughing at our efforts. A couple jiggles and drillings secured our motor shaft into the mounting holes, angled up for easy access to the bow's underside. Clockwise to speed, counter-clockwise to reverse.

I spun the boat around more than a few times before synching with the hand motor's jerky tempo, shifting the steering level back and forth as the engine rumbled. Once in line, the boat tickled the still water, sending ripples in all directions. A ratty *Virgin Atlantic* drawstring bag covered my toes. I wanted to say something to break the silence, but my hand was falling asleep on the hand motor.

Nat wasn't any more eager to start up conversation, leaning against the boat's right side with her eyes closed. The water guzzled under the boat's flat base and sharp edges. Her eyelids fluttered as we rocked.

"Are you seriously asleep right now?"

"Thought the point was to relax."

"Yeah, while I slave away at the hand motor."

“Oh don’t be so dramatic, it’s practically automated.” She sank further in her seat. I slowed the boat down to calm the choppy waves.

“If this were a date, you’d bore me into next week.”

“Good thing it’s not.”

“True. Don’t know how many dates would knock over the wine bottle.”

“It was *whiskey*. And I said I was sorry!”

Mallards peeked from under shrubs framing the lake. Their egg-shaped heads bobbed as they waddled, shades of emerald green flickering below the thinning sunrays. The motor buzzed over their squawks.

A deer interrupted the static surface, swimming across the lake. Its thick hind legs thrashed as it moved along, head grazing the water just a few feet from our boat. It was a baby whitetail, white spots swirling galaxies across its back. I took a long blink.

The water jets around the fawn’s outstretched hooves, airborne streams weaving through loose strands of wet fur. I can see a tuft of hair near its neck, slicked down from where its mother licked it. Kicking in uneven tempo, it sprays the air. The droplets twinkle like hovering crystals, dabbled with green streaks of the mallards’ reflection in the background.

I look back at Nat. Her eyes are still lulled shut. I try to will her into movement next to me. As if staring would somehow snap her out of the time-stop. She’d return my hard look, exclaim, “What the fuck?” And I’d just grin and tell her how you could move overhanging water droplets around. How you could run on water if you wanted because the movement lags. How it shifts a few seconds after each step’s imprint on the frozen surface, touching your feet like mush. How it wouldn’t matter what we moved or changed, because a blink would reboot the scene.

Maybe the shared effort of holding a moment would ease the nausea, or at least prolong it. We could sit together in the jon boat base until we lost track. Our eyes would be so used to staying open that they wouldn't even water. We'd forget the natural grain of our own skin, as it goes from feeling like wax paper, to cold ash, to old fish left drying out in the sun for several days. We'd make a bet out of the side effects, wager wrinkles and grey hairs. My bottom eyelids start twitching.

The fawn's splashing distracts me again, back-spots shifting in and out of focus. With the way it's angled now, I can see bite marks blotting out its tail. Blood sloshes the water behind it. The red veil tangles in fallen Spanish moss and blue-green algae. Bubbles fossilize stray chunks of fur and broken twigs. Blood clots rip apart into slimy pixels, buzzing around its body like premature buzzards and blowflies.

I blink. As the stiffened waves start to slide forward again, a sudden thump strikes the boat base. I feel a gear lurch forward against my back, stirring up the nausea. The clang jerks Nat awake.

"Ria! What happened?"

"I dunno. I think we might have broken the shear pin..."

"Are you sure?"

"The motor's stopped. It's like we hit a stump or something."

Nat glanced at the injured whitetail, its bloody end retreating into the straggly side brush.

"If that deer's made it out here, then the thing that hurt it can't be far behind."

"Yeah. Coyote, probably." Still sluggish from the dizziness, I groped for the backup oar and shook the end bolts into place. The nut slammed into my right pinky before sliding into its hole. Natalie shuddered from the approaching dusk chills.

"Then, let's get going already."



“What do you think I’m doing? I’ve got to paddle us back manually.”

“So, let me help. We’ll get back faster.”

“No, it’s a one-person job. Don’t you remember anything from the last trip?”

“I didn’t even want to go out on this stupid boat!”

“You had no qualms about it just a few seconds ago, nodding off—”

“This was your idea.”

“Typical. Remove yourself from any blame.”

“Oh, and it’s my fault we charged into a stump?”

“Whatever. Your whining’s making it harder to paddle.” I dragged my blistering fingers closer to the oar’s ends before each stroke forward. The moon peaked through the chalky starlight, conducting the current. The boat backslid each break between paddling.

“We’ve been out here for way too long. God, what if they called…”

“Obsessing about it doesn’t do us any favors! Glad that you’ve got your priorities straight.”

“You’re the one that insisted I leave my phone behind! We could have called for help by now.”

“So like you to give up on something. And you’re not even the one doing the work!”

“And what did you bring, Oh Survivor Extraordinaire! What was so important that it made the cut over my phone?” She grabbed the bag at my feet, yanking it by the drawstring. My fifth-grade English composition book poured out of the opening. It flipped open about midway, the passing gust crinkling the pages as it turned them.

“Are you kidding me? This doesn’t help us at all!” She slammed the book into the boat’s side. The wind tugged at a loose page, wrenching it from the worn spine.

“No!” The paper bristled my fingertips before it fluttered into the water, launching over the boat’s seesawing edges. The bloody water curled around the wide-ruled lines and loopy handwriting, smearing the red margin.

I stop blinking, watch the crumbled paper weave in and out of the changing tides. But the water thrusts us further away from the torn page, and every break in rustling leaves, or pause in wave-crashes sets us more back. Our folding chairs huddle around a now extinguished bonfire on the distant shoreline, two small squares shrinking with the current’s push. I curl in my toes to curb the nausea, as the last of the paper bobs before submerging under the murky lake. Nat shut up, tucking the book back into my bag.

The waves slop the boat’s belly and sides, filling the silence. As we inch closer to the dock, I can start to make out individual planks.

“Hey, Ria?” Nat pulled the pressed penny out of her back pocket. She propped the coin on its side in the space between us, and spun it.

“Did you just stop time?”

The coin teetered as the turning slowed. The palm tree side faced up when it landed. The carved fronds glinted in the moonlight and reflected ripples.