

# A PACT, SO WE CAN FLY

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inspired by

*Tomorrowland*

Alkyd on Linen

Mary Henderson



## A Pact, So We Can Fly

Dean Childers rotates through five stations in the morning. Five more after lunch. Mostly he works coasters. No one knows for sure who makes out the rotation schedules. They are written in crisp black ballpoint, ALL CAPS, and posted in the break room two weeks out.

Exemplary marks in every evaluation category this summer, not a single complaint filed. No issues have "reared their pesky little heads," as Mr. Jenkins, the counselor, would have put it. Dean had been in a couple of fights last year, nothing all that serious—name-calling, open-palmed slapping, Jimmy LoBrasco ending up on the ground with a concussion—and besides the suspension, he had been required to visit Mr. Jenkins once a week for the rest of the year. Mr. Jenkins' hair was white and thin, and long strands of it danced on the top of his head when he made large gestures. He reminded Dean on three separate occasions to call him Randy. He crossed his legs so that he would fit in the tiny space behind his desk, and this hiked his pants up, exposing black socks and a thin sliver of pale leg. At the end of each session, he handed Dean a pamphlet dealing with the day's topic.

The last pamphlet, "Dealing with Your Anxiety and Anger," suggests certain exercises: first you watch other people's faces when they are talking, then you speak to yourself in the mirror about something incredibly boring, like the temperature of soup, until finally you are ready to talk with a stranger at the bus stop about the weather. The illustrations are rough line drawings of a boy with unruly hair and big cheeks. It seemed unrealistic, how the boy from the pamphlet keeps pushing headlong into

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awkward situations, smiling the whole time, never turning and running.

"You just have to read the cues," was one of Mr. Jenkins' favorite sayings. "People's faces and their bodies are like road maps."

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Dean can go an entire coaster shift without talking to patrons. Working Line Maintenance or Costume Escort, he sometimes has to give simple directions using a practiced line of Happy America dialogue. He is done meeting with Randy Jenkins, but if he sees him again, he will bring this up: What if he isn't the one doing the mis-reading, what if people in general aren't good listeners? Still, he practices, watches patrons chatter, laugh, and shout at each other all day, and imagines how he might fit into their conversations. Formulates quick and witty answers.

By four o'clock, without a doubt the best time to be at Happy America, the blanket of wet heat peels back and the air thins as if a powerful valve, hidden behind the gift shops and concession stands, has been loosened. The sun falls behind the loops of the Whizzer and the spire of Princess Miracle's Tower and projects complicated shadows over Town Square and the Promenade. The faces of the Early Bird Moms who camped out in the black moat of the parking lot as early as seven AM hang at ease. Lines on the big-ticket rides begin to shrink. After two or three rounds through, Dean begins to think of the patrons as AllAmericanFreckleEarmuffs or SullenGutSlouch or CaramelCutie-ShortShorts. He keeps the names to himself, avoids crossing this Line, mentioned at least twice at Opening Day Orientation. No one goes to the amusement park to strike up a conversation with the guy in the bright blue polo shirt that somehow already has a ketchup stain sprouting in the shape of a tree just below the park logo.

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Three very athletic girls are wandering the park today. Taut is a word that comes to mind, but Dean isn't sure he is using it right. Maybe it is only for inanimate objects. They are accompanied by a big and gangly boy with a soft face. They are pretty and they remind him of the girls at his school who were always reporting him for things he had never actually said. They flip their hair and rake through it with their hands, and their clothes are stretched to the limit at the chests and hips, but they don't act like most of the junior high kids, who come to Happy America to be seen; these four cling to each other tightly. Waiting in line, they turn inward and speak in hot whispers.

"Today we will be famous!" one of the girls says. She has a nose that takes a sudden turn down. She wears heavy stripes of dark eyeliner, and her tank top shoves her breasts up, creating a dark crease of cleavage. The other girls follow everything SharpNose says carefully, waiting their turns to speak. All three have the thick smooth legs of cheerleaders. One of the girls acts like she'd rather not be there. She is quiet but alert, scanning the gift booths and the carnival games as if there might be something interesting to look at.

The quartet zig-zags up the line towards Dean's station, and he picks up more and more of their conversation. SharpNose and BigSoftie reassure the other two now and then. This Big Moment will be worth it, they insist. They are in this together, is the theme they keep coming back to. Then BigSoftie leans in like the quarterback of their huddle and mumble-whispers the rest.

By the time they reach the platform where Dean straps riders in, all of them, even SharpNose, are sizzling with nervous energy. The air around their huddle hisses and crackles. The QuietEscapee has gone pale and it's not clear if she'll make it to the ride before she barfs or passes out. Something isn't right about the way BigSoftie grasps her arm. Not territorial or possessive like a

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boyfriend, just too hard. Like he thinks he needs to steer her. There is a protocol for this, where Dean will call Guest Relations and they will send Security, but there's no way they will make it before the ride takes off. If Dean stops them—and this would most certainly count as Off Script—there will be a scene. Afterwards he'll have to attend a meeting, what the managers call a Sit Down.

They get up to their car and even QuietEscapee is smiling some, but the smile floats lightly on her face, like it might fall off if she moves too quickly. The more Dean watches her—and he is becoming aware that he has been watching her more than is considered appropriate—the more she looks like a girl in his Freshman year art class, except this girl is younger.

The last thing from SharpNose's mouth is something about a Pact.

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When Blake's daughter, Sheila asked him to take her to Happy America, there hadn't been any question as to whether they would go. The money would fly from his pockets; there would be long stretches of waiting under a relentless sun; if he remembered correctly, Happy America would not sell you a real drink. But this was how a father showed love to his daughter when she was fourteen, too young to go to the Radiohead show but way too old for ice cream on the playground.

She had asked on a Friday after school, in the middle of folding herself into the backseat. This was the vulnerable moment repeated every other week, before possibility crashed into reality, when this still might be the one, the magical and emotional daddy-daughter weekend.

"Of course, Sheel. Make sure it's my weekend and I'll take you."

"I already checked," Sheila answered, sighing patiently just

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behind the words in the way she had only recently mastered, "It's your weekend. It's all planned. Just me and my friends."

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In the Happy America of a lifetime ago, Blake and his wife had shuttled Toddler Sheila between watered-down kiddy rides, popcorn stands, and a play area where the corners were padded in foam and vinyl. Cartoon and fairy tale characters had loomed at the edges of it all, waving silently at a fearful Sheila. Their gargantuan heads swayed in large arcs, threatening to overwhelm the human necks inside the costumes. Sheila had fallen into a deep slack-limbed sleep in her mother's arms while they waited for a fourth turn on the Carousel.

Blake agrees with his therapist that dwelling on these sorts of memories is no longer productive.

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The trip to Happy America lay dormant in a back corner of his brain until Thursday, when Sheila's mother called to remind him.

"You're a brave man," she'd chuckled into her end of the phone, and Blake's breath caught the slightest bit at the familiar rasp of her laughter.

What hadn't been made clear, and what he would never have thought to ask about, was that a boy is coming to Happy America with his daughter and her two friends. They call him Sully, which doesn't seem to be a nickname for anything. He is comically large compared to these compact girls, all gymnasts in Sheila's club; he is soft in the face and his shoulders are narrower than his hips, the sort of kid who takes all sorts of hell in junior high. His arms are long, his wrists stab bonily out of his sleeves, and his ears seem to be one growth spurt ahead of the rest of him. He's about to grow one more time, this time outwards, and he'll either be the starting center on the basketball team or a terrifying bully.

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The banter on the drive up covers how great Happy America is, how this might be their only chance to go before everyone goes to summer camp or on vacation at the stupid lakehouse, how none of their parents would take them to a theme park. Blake tries to catch Sheila's eye several times, but she is wedged like a puzzle piece between her two girlfriends in the backseat, smiling more than he's used to seeing lately.

There's a small but intense adolescent stir when Sheila sees the extra ticket in his hand. They have a quick conference off to the side by the day lockers, her friends pretending not to watch.

"Here's the deal, hon," he starts, "you are still on your own. I'm just your backup. What if you run out of money? What if someone gets sick, and needs to leave early?"

What Sheila finally agrees to is that Blake will be allowed to come in, but won't be going on any rides. He'll hold their purses if they need it. Five feet into the park, the four teenagers speed up to a walk-trot, and he doesn't try to keep up. He finds himself surrendering to the rhythms of the park—screech of coaster cars on rails, undulating waves of pre-teen screams. He sits for forty minutes at a time on the distressed Fifties' era park benches, craning, hoping to see Sheila when she comes off the rides.

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At lunch they are giddy, the layers of their customary disgust peeled back to reveal kids with Isee stains at the corners of their mouth. Sheila is the ring-leader. The others speak up only in relation to something that has come out of her mouth. Denise, the new girl, is scared of her and avoids direct eye contact. Blake sits with this new and surprising fact—My Daughter is The Queen Bee—that he will bring up in therapy. This is most likely his fault. This is about the divorce. Aggressive behavior in kids is almost always a defense mechanism.

Sheila waves at him broadly when they split up after lunch.



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Her arm swings in a wide, exaggerated arc, more like a nostalgic interpretation of a good-bye than the real thing.

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Sheila is the first to speak openly about the Suicide Pact. She doesn't use the word suicide at first, but Denise knows right away what she is talking about.

Just this year, three girls from the high school jumped off a derelict train bridge together. On the nightly news, they lined their smiling and expectant yearbook pictures next to each other. After that, Denise's parents had wanted to talk about open lines of communication for a week straight.

"It has to be all of us at the exact same time. The exact moment," Sheila says in one of the quiet spaces when Denise has been hoping they have left the topic behind, "or someone will chicken out."

"We have to make a statement," says Sully, deep and sinusy. "Otherwise it's just messy. It will look like an accident."

"And if you stay behind—if you chicken out—they're just going to ask you forever and ever what happened," Sheila hisses. They all nod agreement. "'Why did they do it?' they'll ask, or 'Can we get you some THER-apy so you don't have vivid nightmares of your friends' bodies splatting up against the KettleCorn stand every night for the rest of your life?'"

This last bit is a perfect impression of Mrs. Phipps, their school guidance counselor. Tinny laughter bounces around between them, and for a few minutes this is like any other trip to Happy America. They buy and share two thick pretzels that have been injected with frosting. They point to spots in the park where important childhood memories reside: threw up in this bush after the spinning teacups ride, finally talked parents into the glow-in-the dark headband at this stand, stood on tippy-toes to be let onto the upside-down ride. Denise washes her hands

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twice after the pretzels, but they still smell like cinnamon rolls.

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Denise runs into Sheila and Brigitte all the time at school, but knows them mainly from High Flyers Gymnastics Club, where she is highest-ranked on vault and working her way up on beam. Sully goes to their school as well, but she hasn't ever spoken to him. He is one of the boys who has grown too quickly, and barely fits into the desks. He ducks under doorways.

The Happy America trip is the first event Denise has been invited to since moving here. Her parents had taken to calling the move The Fresh Start, a term they use to encompass her father's career, the bright color schemes her mother will implement in each room, and her own new and healthy friend groups. When her mother asks her if she is making friends, Denise lists the names of the students who sit next to her in each of her classes. These, mother, these are the kids I will be hanging out with. Soon. Right now, the teachers are assigning so much homework. But the truth is, before Sheila stepped in front of her at the water fountain, extending one manicured and tanned hand —"Hi, I'm Sheila. From gymnastics? And health?"—Denise had not spoken more than a phrase to anyone.

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"This is soo dark. We are so dark," coos Brigitte just before the Whizzer yanks them away from the boarding platform. It is the oldest coaster in the park. It moves in jagged starts and stops as if it has been captured on silent-era film. You can see all of the chains and inner workings from the ground. Sheila and Sully have already decided that the Whizzer doesn't move fast enough or get high enough for what they need. Flying out of this thing would hurt like hell, but you would probably live and be a vegetable for the rest of your life.

Sheila brings them back to the plan after lunch.

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"If we do it now, we avoid all the teenage bullshit," she says. "You think it's bad now? How many kids at the high school off themselves every year? Look at the back of the yearbook, there's a frigging page for it. It's called IN MEMORIAM."

One kid had taken an entire bottle of sleeping pills when he got a B+ in Chemistry. He'd figured out how to write himself the prescription. There were more, Sheila insisted, but all she could remember from that year was the Backer kid, who seemed like he had everything going—money, football, girlfriend—but had somehow ended up on the train tracks in his almost-new Ford pickup.

"Those kids go out all alone," Sheila adds. "Seems sad, right?"

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Sheila is pretty by every standard that matters at their school. She straightens her hair, and has no acne to speak of, and tans her skin. By the afternoon, she is sweating along her hairline, and a thin coat of foundation seems to be sliding towards her jaw. With the movement of the makeup, her skin takes on gradients of orange.

"We'll be going together!" she claps. "We can even hold hands and fly!"

Denise is about to say something about how this isn't flying at all—the opposite of flight, the failure of flight—but Sheila touches her on one arm the way people do when they are pointing out something obvious. Look, the touch says, this is one of the wings you will use.

Sully wants to be clear that, for him, it is more about the statement. He hates this fucking place. There is no Happy America, he says three times in a row, until Sheila finally comments on how deep that sentiment is.

"What about your Dad?" Denise asks. "What if he has to see it?"

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Sheila stops, her lips stuck in a straight line. They are walking on the fringe of the park, mostly knick-knack shops and restaurants where the older parents like to sit in the shade. They have made their way to every corner, as if they hope to cover it all before the Big Ride.

Denise cannot stop searching the empty windows above the gift shops. When she was very young, she had been sure that the costumed characters slept there. She is having trouble walking in straight lines; she bumps into the others, and has near-misses with trash-cans and picnic benches and trees. She is looking hard for the single Happy America detail she can point out to Brigitte and Sully and Sheila to change their minds about this place and the Pact.

"All I asked him for was a ride," Sheila says a long time later, when they have moved from the Fairie section of the park into the Wild West. "He didn't have to come in. I tried to get him to leave." She shrugs one shoulder as if removing a jacket.

They are heading back to the Descent, where the coaster cars sweep down into an abandoned mine that you are supposed to believe has been taken over by howling demons. This is where it is going to happen. Waiting in line for the Descent, they snake their way around hallways made to look like mine tunnels. A recording of tortured screams and dripping water plays on a loop. It is getting late, but it is still warm; some of the heat of the day has been stored in the buildings and the walkways of Happy America. Denise's fingers are cold. She shakes them to get blood back to her fingertips.

Sully had ridden the Descent at least a dozen times before; he is sure it will be perfect. It peaks up high over the park three times before it plummets back under painted plastic rocks. Before they hit the line, he explains that even if the safety latch catches, there is plenty of room to climb out. "Just puff your

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belly when the carny guy comes by to push the bar in."

They finalize the Pact, mostly Sheila's wording, while they are waiting in line. It goes something like this: We pledge to take this huge step together, as one, united in friendship, because in this fucked-up world, that's all there is. We will fly over it all and meet again on the Other Side.

"We should write a song," suggests Brigitte. "Leave the lyrics behind for everyone to see."

There is plenty of giggling and touching. Heat climbs up Denise's body. Her cheeks are tingling. She draws short, shallow breaths. The air won't stay in her. She is leaking oxygen. The line is moving too quickly, more quickly than ever. They turn the last corner onto the platform and her legs fold under in a way that she has never experienced before. She wraps her arm around Sully's long limb for support.

"It's just exciting," is what she says to her three new friends, and laughs.

Sheila and Brigitte and Sully nod their heads in unison. They clap her lightly on the shoulder blades so she knows without a doubt that she belongs with them.

The attendant in the bright blue Happy America polo cues them up and looks extra long at Denise, as if she has spilled on herself. He is dark from working in the sun and his Adam's apple sticks out so far that it demands attention. His eyes are grey and watery, like he is about to cry.

Everything except for the boy's bright shirt blurs for a second. Sully grabs her just above the elbow so she will not fall.

"Are you okay?" asks the attendant. The words come out slow at first, then rush out like they had to get around something stuck in his throat. He smells like french fries.

"She's okay," says Sheila, and cocks her head at him, a subtle angle Denise has seen her use to distract male teachers. "Last

ride of the day.”

On the Descent, the cars have four seats across. Sully still has her elbow, and he guides her into the farthest seat. She sinks down into the soft plastic. To be brave, she tries to imagine what it will feel like, leaving this comfortable seat, entering the air above the coasters and the trees that cluster around the Winding River, flying like a bird lucky enough to live in Happy America. How long will she stay up above the park?

“Puff it out!” Sheila hisses. Everyone else has filled their stomach up like a balloon, but Denise can’t find the air.

The same worker, the young man with the Adam’s apple, makes his way down the line, checking the latches. After peering into each of their laps, he finds Denise again with his eyes. He could be handsome if not for the way his oversized pleated khakis collect at the top of his sneakers. His looks, the smell of cinnamon rolls, the quiet that comes at the end of a long day at the amusement park—these are the things she tries to focus on at this moment. Sully and Sheila look at their shoes, as if something in their eyes might give the Pact away.

“I changed my mind,” Denise blurts, and they feel like the heaviest words that have ever come out of her mouth. She tries to spring up, almost the exact same motion she had imagined using to leave the coaster, and her thighs slam against the padded safety bar. The coaster jerks forward, throws her back into her seat.

“I can’t do it!” she says, louder this time. The coaster moves forward slowly. The boy with the baggy pants and the teary eyes is reaching down for her as if he has known all along. He surrounds her with his elbow and wrist and the full veins that snake around his forearm. He shouts one sudden syllable back over his shoulder to the blue polo shirt working the controls. The coaster jerks to a stop.

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He swings her onto the platform like a folk-dancing partner and she ends up next to the shelving where guests have forgotten their hats and fanny packs and the spray bottles they brought for the heat.

On the coaster, Sully's slab of a body is doubled over, shaking with confined laughter. Brigitte has a hand cupped over her mouth and is averting her eyes. Sheila, her shoulders twisted to the side so that all the riders can see her if they want, shrugs and grins with half of her mouth, an apology to all of Happy America for the delay.

Denise is still holding the attendant at the wrist. She crouches down deep until she is sitting back on her calves and tries to make it look like she is laughing along, but tears tumble down her cheeks, agile, too many to stop.

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### A CONVERSATION WITH COLBY VARGAS

**Dean has impulse problems that he is working on controlling, and he is hyper-sensitive to other's behavioral cues. Why did you not label his condition?**

Dean, like any narrator, is a mash-up of people I have met and interacted with. I suppose some of them would be labelled with disorders or placed on a spectrum, but besides social anxiety, I didn't feel the need to label Dean. I suppose I also stayed away

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from that to avoid readers bringing their own bundle of associations (what "autistic" people are like, or whether he is "learning disabled", etc.) to the story. To me, Dean lives in that huge category of people who have some mal-adaptive behaviors, but haven't been diagnosed with a specific disorder, who are simply "making it" in the real world.

**Why did you choose to write from the 3 different characters' perspectives, rather than solely from the perspective of Sheila, the chief instigator?**

Each of the three narrators has a specific angle, and some limitations, and each has an emotional stake that keeps them from seeing everything. The story began as my attempt to understand the terrifying but fairly persistent phenomenon of suicide "pacts". I began in Dean's mind but realized the answers to the most important question, "Why would someone participate in such a thing?" needed insight. Denise was my attempt to explore how someone who seems, for all intents and purposes, to be healthy, could make this decision, even if only for a brief time. Sheila's father provides us some glimpse of who might instigate (in this case, unsuccessfully) such a thing. Dean began as the set of eyes that would provide some external clues. After a first draft or two, I realized that he couldn't remain empty, flat, neutral.

**Sheila's father is clueless about the suicide pact. How do you feel parents can attune to the warning signs of their children in jeopardy?**

I, and probably every parent, do think about the question of suicide warning signs quite often. My best response has been to keep talking with my daughters, and asking questions. This is my only consistently successful parenting strategy.