

CROSSING OFF

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— First Prize: Short Fiction —

Each List is long: exactly 1,000,007 items. Part of it is delivered the day you are born, by way of sealed envelopes and delivery room nurses, but the rest comes unpredictably, in dribs and drabs, spaced at odd intervals over the course of your life. List items can arrive via pneumatic tube, text message, notes tucked in strange places, telegraph, talking drum, IM, holograph, and over the transom. The details depend on the person and where you live, and on other things, too. I'm not sure who decides. But no matter how your List comes to you, you're supposed to work hard to complete it. All your life. Cradle to grave.

The standard items, aimed at achieving basic self-care and upholding social conventions, consume much of everyone's List, especially the young. I'm not sure how much we all have in common, but judging from what we confide, it's quite a bit. What people say they must do sounds mostly familiar: run errands, call home, pay taxes. Obviously, items instructing you to learn not to drool or wet yourself get crossed off before settling into your life's vocation, but much else about each List's sequence is senseless. I received #589, "Choose a favorite band," long before #1,021 told me to try walking. From the time you're an infant, your guardian tells you which items to complete when.

Mine wasn't an impressive List. As a kid, I completed my unremarkable items one by one:

#14,449: "Sit on a park bench and watch squirrels running around."

#12,282: "Learn scales on a keyboard."

#15,556: "Write a thank-you note."

#10,235: "Learn the Pledge of Allegiance."

That kind of thing.

As I got older, I craved more significant items, but they didn't come. Meanwhile, talking about the Lists made my friends increasingly anxious. So much was riding on them. Some viewed their items as augurs of their own latent greatness, while others felt harried by theirs. Olivia, my best friend, received her #102,787 by way of a carrier pigeon at age nine, "Describe your breakthrough findings in a peer-reviewed journal of astrophysics." She had to tell everybody about it the next day in order to explain the dramatic change in her behavior.

"I can't go to Tricia's slumber party because I have to read up on red dwarfs."

I was jealous until my guardian explained she meant invisible things in the sky, not merry, scarlet-clad little miners, which had entranced me since #74,349 on my list: "Read fairy tales."

Olivia became understandably driven after that and didn't play much, making her hard to relate to. The most difficult thing I'd been asked to attempt by then was my #92,408: "Square dance exuberantly." My do-si-do still lagged after several bewildering attempts, so my guardian pulled me aside.

"Don't worry," she said. "You can exuberantly square dance without doing it well. Just flail about." That should have been my first clue.

Meanwhile, Olivia was having a hard time in calculus, and they say math matters in space. While she studied for hours, alone, the mean fifth grade kids teased her with the name “Astrolivia,” but I never did that. It took me months just to learn to keep up with the callers at the Barndancer’s Yee-haw, and those steps are supposed to be easy if you’ve got two working legs.

All the same, not talking about the Lists created its own set of problems. In the case of Olivia, I might not have stayed friendly with her if I thought she had an item like my #377,055: “Graduate from high school with your class.” I mean, I aimed for a “C” in algebra and spent as much time as I could sophomore year hanging out with my friends. Olivia didn’t. By then, she was truly obsessed with heavenly bodies, and not the ones at the mall. Spending Saturdays there was my #250,399, right before “Keep flirting with boys until you find one you’d like to date.” This took a while, as their Lists were evidently as dull as my own. I worried for Olivia that flirting might also be on her List but remain overlooked until after she’d finished with math. By then it might be too late to learn how.

Nearly everyone eventually gets an item that reads “At age ___ take over management of your own List.” That’s when you start crossing off your own items yourself. That transition is one most people talked about openly, at the mall, the pool, barbecues, tailgate parties, baby showers, and all the other social events I had to attend (per #268,909 thru #271,345). It’s hard when you’re young not to read into your own given crossing-off age. Mine was sixteen, probably because my List wasn’t ambitious, but Olivia was expected to focus on physics until nineteen. Then she moved to a mountain observatory for its thinner air.

The person I envied was Januk. I thought, now here’s a guy who’s apparently free to achieve nothing at all. In high school, he often

cut class to ride his skateboard, and got the first of his many tattoos before he’d reached legal age. Once, behind the cafeteria, he offered to show me the part of his List he was working on then. But what it actually said was, “Ride your skateboard down a flight of stairs without injury,” and “Alter your skin color.” Nowhere did it tell him to do these things more or less constantly.

I was worried that Januk might not be keeping up. I mean, everyone’s got a million seven. And with health expectancy being what it is, you have to knock out a few dozen a day while you can, to stay on the safe side. I had all these mundane repeating items that I was crossing off again and again for years and years, thousands reading, “Shave your legs,” “Floss,” “Fold laundry,” “Remind God to bless America,” “Eat a leafy green vegetable,” and the like. I could complete most of my tasks almost without thinking. I wondered at times if that was the point. Even so, it felt like I had too much left to do.

When we turned eighteen, we all had to register for the draft. Januk kept skateboarding while most of our other friends tried to make progress toward their biggest List items, like getting a degree or, as in my case, an endurable job. “How many skateboarding items are on your List, anyway?” I finally asked him one night during a smoke break between very loud sets at The Lame Duck, where the bouncer didn’t much mind fake IDs.

“Oh, just a handful. I got them all done a long time ago. Check this out!” And he did a trick swinging his limbs and his board over the bench at a bus stop.

“So do you think maybe you should move on to something else, then?”

A lot of people would have been insulted by my question, but he just said “Maybe!” and jumped the curb.

I didn't bring it up again for a while. My own List was stressing me out. #475,221 told me to marry by twenty-two, and #621,040 had me with three kids three years later. In case it's not obvious, these aren't things you can do on your own.

My friends also felt pressured. Tricia was supposed to master the dialect spoken in a remote corner of Papua New Guinea. Her people hailed from Dayton, Ohio, and she hated to travel. Delilah was supposed to play guitar and sing for a large audience, but she was tone deaf. Her instrument was way out of tune. Vikram was working a retail job he hated, but his List required him to pay for his own apartment by age twenty, and he had to save for the deposit. Nothing on Terrence's List required alcohol poisoning—at least, that's what he told me—but that didn't keep him from drinking like a fish. He claimed to have a number of items like, "Find a guru," and "Travel the world with only yourself and a single backpack," and he was making progress toward that in his own way. Whatever.

Next time I saw Januk, he still had his board, now painted with wild designs. Looking at them made me dizzy. He sold a couple like that for real money.

"Did your List tell you to learn how to paint?" I asked.

"Nah," he said. "It was just something I wanted to do."

I told Tricia. "He thinks there's nothing to worry about. Like, you might as well dive into things not even Listed. He says there's time to do what we love, if we really want to."

Her eyes got huge like they do when she just cannot deal, and she stood up to leave the cafe where we'd been talking. "What I'd love best is to get everything crossed off my List. Maybe I'll play when I'm old. Now I've got to get to the gym." She said goodbye in her island language (I assumed) and walked out the door.

When I told my guardian about Januk's approach, she just shook her head. "So. Any progress on finding a husband?" she asked with exasperation.

"I've still got some time."

That night I finally hooked up with Januk. Our lovemaking was intensely kinetic. Anyone else, I'd have assumed his List required obscure sexual positions, but I think Januk was just feeling creative. It felt good in a way I'd not expected. I ended up laughing a lot.

Olivia called from her mountain observatory the next morning in tears. She'd been passed over for the research position she'd poured herself into securing. Her heart was broken.

"Maybe time for a break?" I offered. "Maybe pick up a hobby? Something you can enjoy on the ground?"

"But I'm not finished," she wailed. "I can't cross off what's not done."

"In other news, I bedded Januk," I blurted. I couldn't help it. I was elated.

"The delinquent?" she asked, between snuffles.

"He's selling his art now," I said. "I really like him."

"So you think you're on track for your big deadline, then?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. We don't talk about that."

"About marriage? Or about what you've got left to do?"

"Either one."

"Oh, Cora."

"I know."

I told myself I'd bring it up, but I kept stalling. Something about

Januk's free-wheeling ways made my List seem indecent. We went on a night hike to find luminescent fungi, not on our Lists, rumored to rise from the forest's plush floor. All was lit by a silvery moon. I heard my heart beating as I'd not heard it before. We both came home with ticks.

"I hear Lyme disease symptoms can last years," I said lightly the next day while he worked me over with tweezers. His place abutted the alley behind a greasy spoon diner, where odoriferous refuse was tossed for rats to enjoy.

"Best to avoid it then," he said. "Or is Lyme on your List?"

"No, of course not," I said. But it got me thinking. What if it were?

"You know they just make that shit up," he said, a moment later, while inspecting my rump.

"Lyme disease? I don't think so."

"No, I mean the shit on our Lists. Cross off number three," he said, pointing to my trio of ticks.

"Very funny."

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asked, while we switched positions.

"What? My List?" I started scanning his extremities for little arachnids, tweezers in hand.

"The whole thing." He had beautiful legs, so I was distracted. "People dictating what you do."

I looked up at him. "Lots of things just have to get done. Makes sense to divvy them all up."

"Square dancing needs doing?" I'd told him about that.

"I guess," I said. "Getting people to do it helps keep it alive, and some people like it."

"But not you."

I put down the tweezers. "It wasn't so bad."

He had those deep eyes like wet forest wood, and they were urging me to see what he was seeing. "I just don't understand. Why spend your whole life crossing off things you don't want to do? What if everyone just did what they loved?"

"Like trash collecting and changing diapers? I don't think so. Basic stuff wouldn't get done."

"Basic stuff still doesn't get done." He pointed at the trash piled outside the window. "How about Olivia? Has she gotten laid yet?"

"Januk!"

"I'm just saying. Who's got her on their List? That doesn't seem fair." He might have been joking.

I plucked one of his invertebrates and crushed it against the floor with my thumbnail. "Well, you aren't on my List," I said softly. I felt suddenly shy.

"That's something, I guess. Nice to know we're an item we don't have to cross off."

I turned twenty-two that winter and moved in with Januk. My guardian stopped speaking to me. A guy in a velo club commissioned Januk to paint his bike, and that became a thing. I started cycling with them, going on long rides through the hills between shifts at the diner, feeling alive. We did all right. When we started losing friends to this war or that one, we dodged the draft like so many survivors. It wasn't the first time we'd been asked to surrender our lives. But we had practiced resisting. Many times. Maybe a million and eight.