

Expat

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Sligo extended its silicon nodule and ingested the remaining potato chips on its plate. Three wide-eyed children sitting across from Sligo at the picnic table stared open-mouthed while their father droned on about amoebas and their ability to extract energy from food. Their own chips sat untouched on their plates. The fourth and oldest child in the family tried on different expressions of boredom before settling on one guaranteed to get a rise out of her mother.

Bingo. Her mother frowned. "Angie, honey, you didn't finish your burger."

Angie pushed the burger to the edge of her plate with her fork. "Not hungry anymore." She tilted her head at their dinner companion.

Angie didn't find the slimy creature to be any weirder than most kids her age. She also didn't want to let on how utterly cool she found Sligo. That would only encourage her father and reinforce his smugness. As she saw it, her goal in life was to wipe any and all traces of contentedness from the faces of her parents for the foreseeable future.

Her father finished his monologue. Her mother, out of politeness, attempted conversation with Sligo. "Douglas has told me the story, but maybe you could tell the children about your decision to settle on Earth."

Angie's baby sister Marianne jumped at the squishy sound followed by a thunderous rumble that came from within the amoeba's semi-transparent membrane. Angie saw the outline of a round speaker in his insides wobble like a glass grid work cherry embedded in jello. She suppressed a giggle.

An eyespot formed and centered itself on her mother. "Nce lndscps. Nt crwdd. Fw prdtrs."

Douglas, her father, considered Sligo's words for a minute, before translating. "Nice landscapes. Not crowded and few predators."

"What kind of predators do you have back home?" Angie blurted out.

"Angie, what kind of rude question is that?"

Her mother's scolding tone made her slump on the bench. Angie failed to see how asking Sligo about things on its home world that wanted to eat it was rude.

Her father put a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Lane, she's just curious. Most twelve-year-olds are. Does the question offend you, Sligo?"

Sligo made a horizontal slicing motion with one pseudopod. Angie assumed that meant no.

"Bggr mbs," he answered.

Angie looked at her father.

He seemed perplexed before comprehension dawned. "Bigger amoebas?"

Sligo chopped up and down with its pod.

One of the other mothers approached the table. "Lane, the kids are all going down to the lake. Want to bring the little ones?"

Angie's mother didn't hide her relief at being able to escape with the kids. She hustled them away from the table after efficiently shoving paper plates, leftover food, ants and plastic forks into a garbage bag. Her father left to join some of his business colleagues at the barbecue grill. Angie remained glued to her seat.

Her mother called to her from behind. "Angie, are you coming?"

Angie shook her head. "I hate swimming in icky lake water," she called back.

"Suit yourself." Her mother, bearing armfuls of floats and beach totes, herded the three younger children away.

That left her and Sligo alone. "You like working with my Dad?"

Sligo chopped faster with its pod. "Dgls fn. Gd wrkr. Crtv."

Angie had to think hard now that her father wasn't here. "Douglas is fun?" Chop. "God worker?" Slice. "Oh. Good worker." Chop. Angie was at a loss for "Crtv". She thought about her father and his work on inventing things. "Creative!" Chop, chop.

They talked most of the afternoon and into the early evening after Angie got the hang of interpreting Sligo's words while the Fourth of July picnic waged all around them. She learned that her father had named Sligo. Amoeba didn't have names for themselves; their social exchanges with other amoebas were based on chemical exchanges for recognition and communication. Sligo explained that they sometimes formed social colonies for protection and efficiency.

"Do you have a ... er, mate?" Angie tried to size up Sligo's current body parts without being too obvious.

Sligo rippled. She had already figured out that meant it was thinking. Finally, its body undulated

in a wavelike pattern.

She was afraid something was wrong with it until it said, "Fn fn."

"That was funny?" she said, smiling. Chop, chop, chop. After much back and forth she comprehended that amoebas divided themselves to reproduce.

"That means you are all ... related." It was separated from its other selves. She looked it over again, this time more carefully.

Its color flashed from pale green-gray to pinkish gray. She guessed it was thinking about its homeland. It felt homesick. She could empathize.

Angie also felt homesick. Sick of being at home, that is. She dreamed of the day when she was all grown up and could escape the claustrophobia that was her family. As darkness fell, Sligo glowed around the edges; light circulated over its perimeter. It looked so cool, she thought. Like one of those lighted pins.

They got up to find a place to watch the fireworks. She waited, fascinated, while Sligo formed locomotive pods. They settled themselves next to her family a discreet distance away. She felt gratified that Sligo seemed to understand her need for separation. As the first fireworks erupted, Sligo quickly formed multiple eyespots. Its colors changed to echo those of the fireworks. It produced wavy patterns again, like when it was laughing. She guessed it was happy.

"Hey, Sligo, it was good to get to know you," she said. "Friends are hard to find sometimes."

She noticed a tiny convulsion going on inside it. A pseudopod reached out to her. It bore a spherical ball made of glass. Another tiny ball of glass floated inside it, one sphere embracing another. Sligo extended the object to her.

"It's beautiful, Sligo. For me?" She took it, admiring the simple elegance.

"Frnds," Sligo answered.

Angie smiled at her new friend. "Welcome to Earth. I hope you find it as good a home as the one you left."

"Hm. Wlcm. Thnx."

"Sligo, when you...divide, will the new you also be my friend?"

Sligo chopped up and down with his pod and turned its eyespots her way.

Home is where your friends are, Angie thought, satisfied that she would soon have many more.