

***“Autumn Leaves”***

***A “Finding Mister Wright” fic by Mayumi Hirtzel/Bonusparts***

Rob McAllister stared at his car keys on the table in front of him, torn between picking them up and throwing them away.

His daughter had worked hard for this opportunity to attend an Ivy League university, in her chosen area of study of robotics engineering. She’d been a budding roboticist since she was six years old, sitting in this very living room among her build-a-bot Bionicle toys, her tiny flesh hand cooperating with her equally tiny mechanical one to make, break, and remake again ever more unique toys for her imagination. That joyful playfulness had blossomed into a thoughtful curiosity for control mechanisms and then operational mechanics, leading to ribbons and prizes for robotic design through her junior high and high school years. She’d even received a substantial grant from the university to offset the – very high – cost of tuition, in recognition of her intellect, drive, and accomplishments.

But she was still his little girl. No matter how many short-hemmed dresses, high-heeled shoes, electronic devices, and feminine products she added to the pile of supplies she planned to take to her new school eight hundred miles away, Paige would always be his baby.

Daniel seemed to have less sentimental feelings for that mountain of college-bound-girl stuff.

“Young lady!” his husband called up to the second floor. “We are not taking all of this in the car with us.”

Paige's feet pounded down the stairs, as quick at eighteen as they'd been at eight. "We can put stuff in the backseat," she reasoned from the bannister.

"Your dad and I need to put our bags in there, too."

"You guys are only going for two nights! I've got to last the whole semester."

"You'll be back here at Thanksgiving," Daniel said calmly, and gestured to the mound. "Whittle this."

Paige groaned and clomped over to the pile. She regarded it a long moment before pulling free a single poster tube. "I don't need this."

"Try again," Daniel insisted, and she stamped a foot.

"Dad!" she cried, turning to Rob.

"Don't put this on your dad," Daniel said, saving Rob from the discomfort of being swept into Paige's fury. "You will not need all of this rubbish. I mean, what is even in these?" He pulled at the lid of one of the bottom boxes, opened it, and gaped. "Wh-! Records?!"

Paige stood straight and unyielding. "I like listening to music when I study."

Daniel didn't back down, either. "I am not hauling an entire box full of vinyl up to your dorm room just so it can sit in the bottom of your closet until move-out next year. You don't even have a turntable."

"I'll make friends with someone who does," Paige said, but Daniel waved to the hutch across the living room.

“Put them back, please.”

She tossed her head back for another groan. “Daniel...!”

“Now.”

Paige dragged the box across the rug, leaving a flattened trail of pile knots in her wake. She didn't stay silent for it, grumbling under her breath about how she just wanted to take a little bit of home with her.

Daniel chewed on the inside of his cheek a moment. Then he sighed, defeated by her powerful petulance. “I'll buy you some digital copies. How's that?”

“Can you get me a Sarah Vaughan?” Paige said, her expression abruptly bright and ready. “And some Dinah Washington.”

Those were prime performers for getting cuddly with a partner to, a thought that set off alarm bells in Rob's head. Still, he felt a twinge of satisfaction at having influenced his eighteen-year-old daughter's tastes beyond Gaga and Grande.

Daniel sniffed an amused breath. “Where's your laptop?”

“On my bed,” Paige said.

Before Daniel could move, Rob stood up. “I'll get it.”

He walked to the staircase, leaving his husband and daughter to a more convivial discussion about music and studying. As he went up to Paige's room, a path he'd climbed countless times, he

recalled with tender fondness cradling her sleep-limp, little-girl body in his arms. He paused at the landing. Those days were long gone.

Her door stood ajar, and he stepped into her disheveled room, with its tossed linens, scattered books, and piles of rejected college clothes. He picked up her laptop from the bed, as well as Paddington Bear, a gift from Daniel's brother Marshall when she was nine years old. The tiny toy had lost the buttons on his coat long ago, and the fur on the left side of his head had been irrevocably smashed flat from so many years' worth of nights spent tucked under her chin.

When he returned to the living room, he passed the laptop to Daniel and showed the bear to Paige. "Don't tell me you were going to leave ol' Paddington behind?" he said, half-jokingly.

Paige dropped her shoulders as she turned, with a look of love but also some condescension. "Dad, I'm not a little girl, anymore."

Rob let the toy drift down. "I know that," he muttered.

Daniel looked up from tapping his credit card number into the laptop, and spared Rob a quick glance of commiseration. "I think Marshall would be happy to know something he gave you is going with you to school."

Paige sighed and stood up. "Okay, I get it. You guys don't want me to totally grow up, yet." She plucked Paddington from Rob's hand and pulled the toy to her chest and shined him a forced smile.

"Happy?"

“We know you’re not a little kid anymore,” Rob said, trying to sound reasonable. “But we also know what it’s like to be far away from everything you know. Sometimes, having a little piece of home is all you need to get you through the tough times.”

This time, Paige rolled her eyes. “It’s college, Dad, not the army.”

They got back to prepping and packing, and were only a half-hour past schedule when the car was finally ready to go. Paige had already said her goodbyes to her friends over the last few weeks, to Marshall and his family at supper the night before, and to her mom that past weekend, so all that was left was to get on the road, a good thing since the drive would take eleven hours, even with Rob behind the wheel.

Both dads indulged Paige control of the car’s sound system, and she took the liberty of loading up a playlist with her new music purchases, courtesy of Daniel’s MasterCard. Sarah Vaughan’s sassy vocals followed them along I-90, until they stopped for a late lunch a little more than halfway through the journey, just outside Cleveland. Daniel offered to take the second driving shift, which would take them into Ithaca, another four-and-a-half hours away.

They got back in the car – after groaning from Paige, which Rob countered with a suggestion to take a few laps around the restaurant parking lot – and Daniel started them back on the road.

Before long, they passed into Pennsylvania. Rob settled into the front passenger seat for a quick nap, but in the middle of his drowse, he heard a familiar ballad melody coming from the car speakers. It wasn’t from his blues and jazz collection, but he recognized it anyway, somehow. Daniel did, as well, and had started to sing along with the vocals in a smooth and quiet voice:

“They say that all good things must end some day. Autumn leaves must fall.”

Paige joined him, surprisingly harmonic. "But don't you know that it hurts me so, to say goodbye to you-oo?"

"Wish you didn't have to go," they crooned together. "No, no, no, no!"

Instinct surpassed inhibition, and Rob added his voice to both of theirs, so they sang all three of them together:

"And when the rain beats against my windowpane, I'll think of summer days again, and dream of you."

The refrain repeated, and each of them turned louder, until they were singing above the stereo system. They were laughing, too, through the end of their second, slightly off-key chorus.

"We'd best stop," Daniel said as the music fell away. "Before someone mistakes us for a bloody car commercial."

Paige kept giggling from the backseat. "That was fun!"

"How do you even know that one?" Daniel asked. "It's very old."

"It was in your library." Paige's pitch went up a key. "Can we try another one?"

"No," Rob and Daniel said at the same time, which made Paige laugh again.

Even without more karaoke, the miles passed easily beneath them. They talked for a while about different things, though during a lull, Rob fell into another doze. He snorted himself awake around a place called Bath, in New York.

“Sorry.” He threw a glance to the backseat, to see Paige’s cheek bobbing against the support of her seatbelt, just like it used to do when he’d take her for drives in her carseat.

“That’s okay,” Daniel murmured back.

“How long was I out?”

“Only about forty minutes.”

“You doing all right?”

“Yeah.” Daniel shifted from one hip to the other and sniffed. “How much farther?”

Rob pulled his phone from the cup-holder between them and opened up the map application.

“A little over an hour.”

His husband’s brows peaked as he flashed a look into the rearview. “Should we wake the traveler?”

“I’m awake,” Paige said, though she mostly slurred the words. She yawned and stretched both arms, making the seat creak beneath her butt. “How long ‘til we get to the hotel?”

“Another hour or so,” Rob repeated for her.

Paige sat forward between the front seats, suddenly chipper. “Can we walk up to campus when we get there? It’s only about a mile from the hotel.”

Daniel grunted. “I wouldn’t mind a walk after this.”

Rob realized their hotel's relatively close proximity to campus had been planned as a boon, though the notion that Paige could walk from it into her new life pulled at his insides. Nevertheless, he tried to keep an open, easygoing manner. "So long as we can get something to eat, too."

With those plans made, they pulled up to the downtown hotel with an eagerness to go out again. They left what was in the trunk in the trunk – which was mostly Paige's move-in stuff, anyway – and hauled the rest into their King room on the third floor.

Paige dropped Paddington and her bag onto the chaise beneath the window before hopping back to the door. There, she paused, for an incredulous look at Rob sitting on the King bed next to Daniel, who'd stretched out on his back in a dozing position.

"I thought we were going up to campus?" she said.

Daniel let out a groan as he pushed himself up again. "Yep!"

Rob rubbed Daniel's back as they stood up together, while Paige snickered by the door.

"You're a pair of old men," she said, and Rob rustled his hand on the top of her head in a playful scold. She yelped and fixed her hair, and trotted ahead of them to the stairs.

Rob hadn't been to the campus before – as the top-ranking engineer in the family, Daniel had taken Paige for her prospective weekend last year – so everything was new to him. It was very pretty, with a mix of old-school brick-and-mortar structures, and glass-and-metal towers of modern design. It was also very big, boasting expanses of greenspace he hadn't seen outside of parks. Of course, this was essentially the New York countryside.

They peeked into the student union, which was understandably closed, before heading back into the main downtown area. There, they treated Paige to supper at a cute little taqueria that would likely be too expensive for her student budget, unless Serena decided to up her monthly stipend. Which was totally possible, though Rob decided not to mention that, in case his daughter got any ideas.

Paige remembered a devilishly decadent ice cream parlor from her earlier visit, too, so of course they had to stop for a sundae. After that, everyone was ready to climb into bed back at the hotel.

“Sorry if I snore,” Paige said, as she settled onto her pullout bed in her pyjamas, with her mechanical arm resting on the desk like it would at home, and Paddington Bear tucked under her other one.

Daniel lay back on the King bed. “I’m so tired, I doubt I’ll even hear.”

“Mind if I read a while?” Rob asked, and Daniel shifted onto his side.

“Fine by me.”

“Me, too,” Paige said, and had barely finished her yawn before she fell into one of her easy, lightly-snoring sleeps.

Rob thought Daniel might comment, but when he looked at his husband, Daniel was already asleep, too. That left Rob awake on his own. Though, he struggled to remind himself, not alone.

He turned his attention from Daniel to Paige, watching her in the dim fall of light from the bedside lamp for a long time. He used to watch her sleep like this when she was tiny. She was still petite – she’d probably never grow past his shoulder – but she was mostly a woman, now. Starting tomorrow, she’d be a college student, and starting tomorrow night, she’d be out from his paternal protection.

He slid down in the bed and clicked off the light, watching his daughter sleeping peacefully a moment longer before he closed his eyes on this last day of having her as his little girl.

The alarms from both Paige's and Daniel's phones went off at six in the morning, which Rob thought was overkill; they were in the eight-to-eleven move-in group, and the campus was less than a mile away. It did give Paige an opportunity to call her mom, though, and Daniel the time to re-sort the orientation instructions, so there'd be no panic or fuss when they drove onto campus.

With nothing better to do, Rob took a run in the hotel fitness center to get his blood pumping. The place stayed empty the full half-hour he was there, although he did see plenty of families pass by the glass doors, most of them with at least one teenager who shared the same anxious-excited energy as Paige.

When he got back to the room, his daughter pressed him into a hustle. She wanted to get moving as soon as possible...albeit with a stop at a downtown café, for a breakfast of waffles smothered in fresh berries.

A full breakfast usually wasn't conducive to lugging boxes, but Rob was glad they'd grabbed food beforehand when they pulled onto the campus again. Cars were everywhere, moving in controlled patterns but sluggishly along the limited paths. Finally, they got to her dorm, and Paige hopped out, her ponytail flailing behind her.

"Wait," Rob called, as he cranked the car into park.

"I'm just going to check in," Paige called back, pointing to the tented table outside the doors.

As Daniel clicked himself free of his seatbelt, he leaned in for a stage whisper. “Foals get big,” he said, in reminder of their old shared adage for the need to let Paige take care of herself.

Rob unlocked his own seatbelt with a reluctant click. “I know.”

Not three minutes later, their foal came trotting back to the car with a plastic shopping bag stuffed with fliers and papers and assorted whatnot, clutched under her synthetic arm.

“I’m on the third floor. Three-oh-seven!” she said with a squeal, as if that represented some deeper significance.

“Third-floor walk-up,” Daniel muttered. “So glad we left the vinyl at home.”

“Ha ha,” Paige said flatly, before patting Rob’s door. “Come on! I want to see my room!”

Daniel was right: hauling Paige’s bags and boxes up three sets of stairs was no treat. But the room that greeted them – with Paige’s name written on a cute, paper-cutout hedgehog, next to another that read “Ani” – was charming, if compact. Two desks were set against the walls framing the double-set of windows, and behind each of the desk chairs sat a twin bed, one on each side of the room. The bed on the left was already made with a puffy duvet and pillows, and at its foot stood a dresser. The same space at Paige’s bed was occupied by a shallow vanity. The room had three door, one for a wardrobe, one for an antiquated sink room, and the third out to the corridor. Rob and Daniel both had to angle themselves through that last one, especially while carrying boxes of clothing and linens.

Paige gave another excited squeal as she hopped onto the naked mattress. “Isn’t this awesome?”

It was only a dorm room, but Rob smiled for her and said, “Cozy. You want to start unpacking, or help with the next load?”

“Unpack.” She bounced up from the bed toward the largest box, which held her sheets, pillows, and blankets, and flipped the top open. She grabbed the mattress cover, unfurling it with a flourish and a grin while Rob led Daniel back down the stairs to the car.

“It still doesn’t feel quite real,” Daniel said, as they briefly stepped to the side for another set of bewildered-looking parents and a beaming young woman leading their way. “But, I’m glad she already seems to love it.”

Rob nodded, somewhat slowly. “Yeah.”

His lack of enthusiasm didn’t escape his husband’s notice.

“What’s wrong?” Daniel asked.

“Nothing.”

Daniel bent his head close. “Just because she loves being here doesn’t mean she doesn’t love home, too.”

“I know.” Rob shrugged a shoulder. “I guess, college just wasn’t like this, for me.”

“Well, you were older,” Daniel said, and smiled again. “And, you had a family.”

Those days seemed a lifetime ago. They were, in fact: Paige’s lifetime.

“What about you?” Rob asked. “Was going—” He almost said “away” but quickly changed his mind. “—to college like this for you?”

“You’re talking about something that happened twenty years ago.” Daniel’s gaze followed a young resident carrying a crate of glossy virtual-reality gear in her arms. “But, to answer your question, no. My experience was nothing like this.”

Rob popped the trunk and paused. “These kids just seem so old, to me. So...adult.” He faced Daniel with pinched brows. “Our daughter’s an *adult*.”

His husband matched his pensive look a moment, before breaking into a wry smile. “You say, as we take her bags up to the dorm room we took out a second mortgage to pay for.”

Rob smirked a little bit for that logic. “I guess, when you put it that way...!”

When they returned to Paige’s room with the last of her things, they found her engaged in animated chatter with a round-faced Indian girl who introduced herself as Paige’s new roommate, Ani Bhattacharya.

“Ani got to move in yesterday,” Paige said after a round of greetings.

“Internationals,” the other girl explained.

“Where are your folks?” Rob asked.

“Jaipur.”

Rob was proud to know the name. “The Pink City?”

Ani's face lit up, her eyes going wide. "You know it?"

"Only from books," Rob was a bit sad to admit. "Your parents are already back home?"

"They didn't come."

Paige let out a tiny humph. "Must be nice," she said, shooting a meaningful glance at Rob. "Your parents trusting to do this on your own."

Ani batted her fingers. "My sister went here, too, so they figured, why make the trip a second time for what they already know?"

"Is she still here?" Paige asked, already on to the next topic.

"She's back home," Ani said, shaking her head. "Helping my other sister with her family."

Paige blinked. "Wow. How many sisters do you have?"

"Four," Ani said, pulling a face. "You want one?"

The girls laughed, and immediately went back to chatting like old friends, with Paige occasionally breaking away to hang some clothes in the wardrobe. Ani crooned over Paige's Paddington Bear – "*Oh! I have one just like this! I wish I'd brought him with me.*" – and Paige suggested she snuggle with it whenever she might feel homesick. Ani passed the bear over again, with heartfelt thanks for the offer, while Rob smiled smugly at Paige. She just rolled her eyes and returned to Ani.

While the girls resumed talking, Daniel unloaded the electronics and chargers, squeezing under the desk for the power outlets. Rob unpacked the rest of Paige's linens, left forgotten in her rambling, bubbly conversation.

As their assigned move-in time drew to a close, they needed to get the car off campus, to make way for the next set of arrivals.

“I need to go to registration,” Paige said.

Ani smiled. “You want me to take you? I know where it is.”

Daniel nudged Rob. “Why don’t you go with them, in case she needs you for anything? I’ll take care of the car, and meet up with you in forty-five minutes or so.”

Rob nodded. “Sounds good,” he said, and passed over the keys.

Ani led them to the registration hall. Standing in the long, slow-moving queue, the girls continued to bounce from one teenage topic to the next, with nary a wasted breath. From their class schedules to their favorite music...to ogling the lanky, dreadlocked upperclassman boy working the check-in table. Rob wasn’t so keen on the girls’ giggly interest, but he decided to keep quiet. When it came to his daughter and the opposite sex, it was probably wiser not to voice any fatherly prejudices.

When Daniel caught up with them, they ventured out into the campus again. They located the Financial Aid and Bursar’s offices, then it was on to browsing the bookstore. No syllabi, yet, so they enjoyed the displays of popular books, school supplies, and – for the girls – photo opportunities with the Big Red Bear. Before they knew it, it was time for the separate departmental orientations. Ani was enrolled as a Life Sciences major, so she went one way, while Paige led Rob and Daniel to the Engineering welcome. The department chair talked for fifteen minutes about the value of science before inviting the new students to meet some of their faculty. Paige walked into the circus of milling professors and introduced herself to three of them – all robotics instructors – while Rob hung back to watch her.

She seemed different, suddenly. More like a woman than he had ever seen her. Even when she'd walked across the auditorium stage in her white cap and gown, to accept her high school diploma, he'd still been able to recognize his baby with the bouncy ponytails and chubby cheeks. Now, though...

Daniel tilted his head for a whisper. "That's Joydeep Venkatesh," he said, indicating the short man in tweed currently talking with Paige.

Rob tilted back. "You know him?"

"I know *of* him."

"Good?"

"Very." Daniel blew a quick sigh through his nose. "The faculty here is insane! I hope these kids appreciate it."

Rob returned to watching his daughter, who was gesturing with her mechanical arm. "The kid seems impressed," he said, though the professor seemed equally as fascinated by her robotic fingers.

Daniel's hand touched his, lightly and just along the side, in a careful non-display of affection. "She's going to be great."

A smile – sad, gentle, and proud – came to Rob's lips, before he could stop it. "Yeah."

The faculty started to filter out from the reception, signaling its end. Some of the students followed, but Paige stayed standing and staring in the emptying hall.

Rob rubbed her shoulder. "Everything okay, kiddo?"

She looked up at him, her green eyes wide and searching. “Can we go to dinner, just the three of us?”

Rob nearly broke into tears.

They walked off campus, back into downtown, Paige in the middle and Rob and Daniel on either side. She didn’t hold their hands like when she was younger, but she did chatter and fill the air around them with her laughter.

They chose a charming if somewhat expensive tapas restaurant slightly off the tourist path. It was crowded inside but somehow not too loud, with low tables set for two and four. They made it in with only a twenty-minute wait, and enjoyed sharable plates for both entrees and dessert.

Far too soon, the dinner was over. They took a leisurely walk back to campus, pausing outside a pastry shop where Daniel ducked in to buy some scones for the morning. Rob stayed outside with Paige, grateful for the brief alone time, even though he didn’t know what to say. But the minutes were ticking away, so he blurted the easiest thing to come to mind:

“Remember, your mom’s going to come get you for Fall Break.”

“Yeah, I know,” Paige said.

“Call her tonight,” Rob suggested. “You know how she gets when you don’t keep her in the loop.”

“Okay.”

“Call me, too, once in a while, huh?”

Paige smiled, with a cringe of her brows that made him feel foolish and loved in the same moment. "Dad."

He shrugged, saying simply, "I love you."

"I love you, too. But you don't have to worry. I'll be fine."

"I know." Rob laughed a little bit. "Believe me, I know!"

She cocked her head at him, and said, "You'll be fine, too."

Again, tears threatened. But he held them in check, and said, "That, I'm not so sure about."

Her smile grew wider. "I am."

She swayed back and forth on her heels, and he almost thought she might tumble into his arms. But Daniel joined them at that moment, and he passed her a rather large carry-bag of baked goods. Paige took them, and paused. The green in her eyes shimmered.

"I don't mean to kick you guys to the curb, but...." She sighed and pulled her mouth to one side.

Rob guessed at what was coming, but Daniel blinked at her. "You don't want us to come to Convocation tomorrow?" he asked.

"It's just a speech." Paige bumped her shoulders up. "I just think it would be better for everybody if I wake up tomorrow and have to figure things out for myself." Her smile came again, tentative, this time. "I need to see if I can."

That sentiment hit him like a punch to the gut, but Rob managed a chuckle. “Nobody doubts that.”

“It’s not that I don’t love you guys,” she began, when Daniel waved her down.

“We understand. This is your adventure.”

Rob cocked his head. “Can we at least walk you back?”

Paige swayed close to him and grinned. “Sure.”

The campus entrance closest to her dorm was two miles away, but it was a quick two miles. When they got there, Paige paused again, and faced them, clutching her bag of pastries with a wobbly smile.

“You’re sure about this?” Daniel asked; Rob was grateful he didn’t have to say it.

Paige nodded. “Yeah.”

Daniel took her in a hug first, grunting his affection.

“We love you so much, pickle!” He stood up and looked at her. “And, we’re so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Paige said, nodding again. Then she turned to Rob.

He put his arms around her, counted to three, and forced himself to step back, or else he’d never let go.

“You know how to reach me,” he said. “Anytime. For anything.” He cracked a smile. “Except for money. If you need money, call your mom.”

Paige giggled, that beautifully effortless, unpretentious, high-pitched swing of her voice that had always made Rob's heart swell, and still did.

"Okay," she said, and hugged him again without his prompting. He thought he heard her sniff against his chest before she pulled away, to fix both of them with a pointed, serious look. "Get plenty of rest, and drive safe tomorrow. And, text me when you get home."

"Yes, ma'am," Rob said with a mock-salute.

She fluttered her lashes, once, and rose with a deep inhalation that made her stand straight. When she let it go, she said, "I guess this is it."

Rob nodded. "Go get 'em," he said, and offered her the bravest smile he could make.

She smiled, too, and waved. "See you at Thanksgiving." Then, she turned and walked away.

Rob backed up a step, and a second, when Paige rounded a path that took her out of his sight.

Daniel put a hand on his shoulder, and they started back to the hotel in thoughtful silence. It wasn't uncomfortable, save for its lack of spritely laughter. More than halfway along their circuitous downtown route, though, Rob stopped and looked at Daniel.

"I don't know about you, but I don't feel much like staying here another night, just to get up and leave without seeing the kid."

Daniel cringed his nose. "I also don't feel much like driving for eleven hours right now."

Rob shrugged. "It's not like there aren't any other hotels from here to Chicago. We could buy a bottle of wine, check out tonight, and start driving. When we get tired, we can find a place to stay, get drunk, and make out 'til we fall asleep."

A smile twitched at his husband's lips. "That actually sounds nice." They started walking again, and Daniel bumped Rob with his arm. "If nothing else," he said, "that should keep me from crying."

Rob slipped his arm around Daniel's neck and pulled him close for a swift bump of heads. "Me, too."

They laughed at their own sadness, and cried a little bit, too, and began the long journey home, just the two of them.