

Killing Time by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

J P pedals her ancient Schwinn with Paula on the handlebars, laughing, her head thrown back. Paula keeps her bare feet outstretched, afraid that her toes will get caught in the spokes. The morning is bright, the sun a yellow demon that will create haze in the afternoon. It is seven AM. It is summer. And they are off to play tennis before the arrival of the blistering heat.

"Mrs. Farris?"

Even at fifteen, she is pear-shaped, this girl who is Paula's best friend. Her black hair is cut short around her too-small face and her torso is long, ungainly. Her hips are wide and her legs seem to have come from another body, particularly this morning, looking long and narrow in her tennis shorts. Her extremely white Keds reflect the paleness of her skin.

Paula is better proportioned but too thin. Paula's shorts are tiny, her shirt loose, and her tennis shoes scuffed with the overwork she has put them through. Paula's not athletic either, but she loves tennis -- the way the ball bounces on the court, the whoosh of the racket as it moves through the air, the wobble of the fabric net in the early morning breeze.

Paula and JP play now so that no one will see them -- two uncoordinated girls, trying to become famous, like Billie Jean King, their heroine. They can't even bat the ball back and forth more than twice, but they try. They giggle and they run and they sweat, finally collapsing in a heap against the wire mesh walls someone has thoughtfully erected around the high school's tennis court.

Of course, they don't think of bringing water or breakfast. They're not practical. They just lean their sticky bodies against each other, and wonder if it's too early to ride to the city pool where Michael Tomlin lifeguards. Michael and Paula used to go together, and he still has a crush on her.

JP believes Paula still has a crush on him too, and she might not be wrong.

JP has always known Paula better than she has known herself.

"Mrs. Farris. Concentrate."

The pool water is hot and a little too green. The chlorine smell is strong. Paula levers herself out with her arms, and sprawls on the rough concrete edge.

JP is in the shallow end, splashing water at Mark Burde, who looks a little pudgy in his baggy swim trunks. JP thinks he's cute. Paula thinks he's a freak, and a dumb one at that. But JP isn't into brains like Paula is. JP's smarts are the people kind. Paula prefers books.

Michael's not here this morning. He didn't show, which isn't unusual given his home life. Paula grabs her towel and sloshes to the burned grass outside the concrete perimeter. Kids scream and laugh, paddling around with their plastic toys. A few older boys cannonball off the diving board, dousing everyone.

She closes her eyes and wishes she's out of here, somewhere else, somewhere glamorous where she doesn't know everyone and no one knows her. She --

"Mrs. Farris?"

Oh, that voice disturbs her. She opens her eyes. They feel gummy, as if she's been asleep for a long time.

And maybe she has. She doesn't remember this room, painted a soothing blue, with steel lamps and instruments pushed off to the side. She's not on a bed; she's on some kind of cot. There are bars on

either side, with controls near her fingertips.

A hospital bed, then.

Her daughter, Kimberly, perches at the foot, her hands clasped. She has that bright-eyed expression that means she wants something desperately to succeed. She's gotten that expression ever since she was a little girl, and that expression has made her seem too eager, too needy, too intense.

Behind her, a thin man with a shiny face clutches a clipboard. He wears a white smock and has a stethoscope around his neck, but something tells Paula Farris that he's not a doctor. At least, not the kind she's used to.

"Pleasant and very real, isn't it, Mrs. Farris?" he asks as if she already knows what this conversation is about, as if she has been participating in it from the very beginning.

She tries to prop herself up, but her arms are too frail. She looks at them, startled to see skin so wrinkled that it hangs loose over her bones. She can remember -- vividly -- how it feels to lever herself out of a swimming pool using only her upper arm strength. But these arms have no strength. They look as if any sort of pressure on them will make them shatter like crystal.

"Mom?" Kimberly asks. "What do you think?"

Paula thinks she is having trouble remembering what any of this is about. She's been asleep, can't they tell that? And she isn't waking up well. But she's never woken up well, not like her own mother who was always cheerful in the mornings, only to have that cheer washed away as the pressures of the day overwhelmed her.

"Perhaps we should try again," the doctor says to Kimberly in a conspiratorial tone, as if Paula isn't even in the room. "Sometimes it takes two or three tries before the equipment works."

"If you think it's safe," Kimberly whispers. Paula has to strain to hear her. "My mother isn't usually this confused."

"It's safe," he says.

Then he steps closer to the bed.

"Mrs. Farris?" he says in that too-loud slightly baby-talk voice people use with the elderly. "We're going to send you under one more time. Is that all right with you? We want to make sure you enjoy the experience. After all, there's no point if you don't."

Paula frowns at this, remembering some vague discussion of a point. Some reason for the bed, the small room, her daughter's concern.

"Just do it," Kimberly whispers, and the so-called doctor touches a panel on the wall. The bed shivers, once, as if it is trying to find a way out of the room, and Paula Farris feels a chill run through her, a chill she can't abide....

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Gasoline runs up the plastic hose and into her mouth. She remembers to spit almost too late, the foul-tasting liquid stinging some cuts in her gums. She pulls the hose away from her lips, and gasoline spills across the gravel in front of her. Craig grabs the hose from her and sticks it into the open gas tank of his rusty Impala.

The hose goes all the way back to the Cadillac, which is parked in the hotel's lot at the very edge of the alley. Maybe the owner thought this part of the parking lot was safe.

Instead it's easy pickins. Craig says he hasn't bought gas for a month.

Paula's just glad he made her lean forward when he told her how to suck on that hose. Otherwise she would have been doused in gasoline. And with Craig's friend Johnny smoking not two yards away, being covered in gasoline is dangerous.

The fall night is ice-cold, more like December than early October. The weather forecast predicts snow by morning.

Paula gets up carefully, pretending that the gasoline hasn't fouled up the inside of her mouth. She wonders if she'll smell gas for the rest of the week. She won't be able to stand it.

She brushes gravel off the knees of her jeans, then walks over to the fourth member of their little party -- Marilyn, who used to have the job of starting the pump, as Johnny called it. Marilyn is holding a bottle of scotch she stole from her parents' kitchen.

Paula takes the scotch, swigs it, using the alcohol to rinse out her mouth. Then she spits the liquid into the gravel.

"Hey!" Johnny says, flipping his still-lit cigarette toward the grass behind him. "That shit's expensive."

"Like you care," Paula says. Her tongue is numb. Talking feels weird.

"I care, man. I'd rather drink it than spit it out."

Paula meets his gaze, brings the bottle to her lips and takes another swig. He watches, frowning, as she sprays the alcohol toward him.

"Hey!" he says again. "Stop that."

"Just clearing out my mouth," she says. "Haven't girls done that around you before?"

"Not my problem that you had to prove you suck better than any other chick," he says, swiping the bottle from her. "You're nuts, you know that?"

She's nuts? She's not the one who drinks all the time. She only drinks when she's out with this crew, and only because there's nothing else to do. JP has invited her to spend nights at the movies or playing cards, but Paula needs something more than cards.

She and JP are starting to have a parting of the ways. JP is too young for her, even though they're the same age. JP believes in this town, believes she'll stay here forever; she wants the husband and 2.5 kids, and a house in the rich neighborhood.

Paula wants to get the hell out of here, and she still has three years to go before she gets her free pass. Graduation seems like forever from now.

But something's got to be better than this place. Or at least, different. And different is always better.

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"Mom?" Kimberly's voice. She sounds concerned. "You all right?"

Paula opens her eyes. The room is the same. Maybe a bit smaller than it should be. All three of them seem crammed in here. Kimberly has moved up to Paula's side. Kimberly's hand is on her shoulder, resting gently, as if she's afraid she'll break her mother by touching her too hard.

The man with the clipboard still stands by the wall. He looks distracted, as if he's done this too many times.

But he's right. This time, she's come out clearer. This time, she remembers.

It's a dream, but not a dream. Her mouth still tastes ever so faintly of gasoline and alcohol. It's as if she's actually there, inside the memory, inside her fifteenth year, recorded detail for detail in the back of her brain -- the parts they used to call unused when she was a girl, way back when.

Her eyes tear up, not because she's sad, but because she's tired. Kimberly wanted this to work so badly, and Paula doesn't want to tell her that it doesn't -- at least, not in the way it's supposed to.

"Mom?"

"Give her a minute," the doctor -- actually, he's an administrator, named ... Ralph? Ray? Rudy? She still can't remember, probably because she never bothered to learn his name.

Somewhere, in the past ninety years, she's learned that some names aren't important, will never be important, and shouldn't be made important by committing them to memory. Rudy's or Roy's or Roger's is one of those.

She closes her eyes, not because she needs the rest, but because she needs a moment to think. New procedure, expensive treatment, a way of comfortably warehousing the very old. How does the slogan go? _When old age becomes irreversible, call us_.

Irreversible. The deterioration is inevitable. No matter what they've learned, all the secrets they've mastered, humans still can't stop growing old.

"Mom?"

Of course, Kimberly can't wait. Sixty years old, and she's never learned patience. Her generation might avoid the inevitability of age. They're working on it. Thanks to some expensive genetic repair, Kimberly has looked the same since she was forty-five.

Paula opens her eyes again, half expecting to see her daughter as a little girl, a baby really, with that expressive face, back when too-eager, too-intense was appropriate. Why hadn't they probed those memories?

And the answer comes as quickly as the question: because this is a free trial, and they haven't done a lot of prep. So many people hit their peak in high school that the free trial sends everyone back to those years, no questions asked.

"What did you think?" Kimberly asks.

She's going to have to answer. This is supposed to be a gift, a way of spending her declining years without misery, lost in a world of memories, re-experiencing them -- literally -- moment for moment. She agreed to it because she likes new experiences. She's frail and she is becoming a burden, not because she doesn't have the funds to take care of herself -- she does -- but because Kimberly actually has a sense of responsibility and feels she must take care of her mother.

And Paula doesn't have to go back to high school. She can pick the happiest decade of her life, and revisit it.

Ever since Kimberly proposed this, Paula wondered which decade that would be. Her twenties -- poor, but striving, her body in the best shape ever? Her thirties -- struggling, with a young daughter, a husband who leaves her after five years and a job she hates? Her forties -- finally making enough to work fewer hours, only to monitor that daughter through a tough high school period? Or her fifties -- alone for the first time in thirty years, trying to figure out how to live the rest of her life?

There is no happy decade. Just like there was no happy year. She has always believed the best was ahead of her.

Even now. Because there has to be something beyond this, right? And revisiting the memories is just a different kind of oblivion, same as taking tranquilizers or drinking too much or sleeping all the time.

She only has a decade or so left. Why would she want to avoid it? Maybe it'll be the best one.

"Mom, please," Kimberly says. "You're scaring me."

Roderick or Reggie or Ralph is watching Paula now too. She isn't reacting like everyone else. Most people like this. She's seen the testimonials. She's actually heard from some friends who went through the free trial, but couldn't afford the entire package. Everyone loves this idea.

Except her.

"Sorry," Paula says. "I guess I wasn't very happy in high school."

But she was. She was as happy as she could be, given who she was and where she was. She was looking forward, moving, constantly moving.

She was herself, even then.

Ryan/Rufus/Reuben is reminding her in that sing-song I-hate-old-people voice of his that she can go to any year, any decade, any time. She isn't really listening.

Instead, she's thinking of people she hasn't thought of in years: Marilyn, who got pregnant that winter and disappeared; Craig, who enlisted and became career military; JP, who died at thirty-six of breast cancer. Paula's lost track of them, just like she'll lose track of Richard/Roland/ Ronald the minute she leaves this room.

Their lives intersect with hers ever so briefly, and they might be important for a few minutes, a few days, a few years. But only a handful of people are important forever.

Like Kimberly and her children, and now her children's children. How can Paula disappear into her past and not keep up with Kimberly? Tracking Kimberly has been an obsession for sixty years.

"She's not going to do this," Kimberly says in a resigned voice. There will be a fight when they get home. Kimberly will sulk -- I'm doing this for you, Mother -- and Paula will tell her, for the billionth time, to grow up.

But the ironic thing is that Kimberly is doing this for Paula. Kimberly believes that happiness can be permanent, forgetting that nothing is permanent, nothing at all.

Paula hasn't been able to teach her daughter that in sixty years; she doubts she'll be able to teach

Kimberly about happiness in the next decade.

But she'll try.

Paula clutches her daughter's hand. "Thanks for understanding," she says.

But what she really means is _Thanks for knowing me well enough to refuse this for me, so I don't have to explain myself to this bit player in the history of my life._

Kimberly smiles at her, but is clearly distracted, probably trying to figure out how to care for her mother now, now that the warehousing and oblivion options have just gone away. Paula is going to have to tell her, yet again, that it's Paula's choice. Paula's life.

Kimberly's not responsible for it.

Besides, Paula likes adventure. Kimberly never has. That's the difference between them, an essential difference. As Paula's own mother used to say, _How dull would life be if we were all the same?_

Or if we've lived it before and were only repeating, like television shows used to do in the summers when Paula was a child. Sometimes revisiting old favorites is fun -- there are bits forgotten, moments not noticed the first time around -- but mostly it's a method for killing time.

Killing time is so impractical. Unlike old friends and family, time never has the courtesy to remain dead.

"Let's go home," Paula says to Kimberly.

Kimberly nods and squeezes Paula's hand just tightly enough, then goes to talk to Raul/Rafe/Rene about transportation, and other matters, waivers to sign, promises already broken.

Paula eases herself up in this strange bed with its powers to probe the mind and activate memories that would best remain buried. It's time to get out of here, and go somewhere else.

To live those last few years, no matter what they bring.

To continue the adventure, all the way to its bitter end.