

PARACOSM

By Camryn Moore

I don't remember stepping inside my paracosm, or walking into the forest outside my broken childhood home. But I'm surrounded by the beautiful, vivid colors of my childhood bedroom so I know it had to have happened at some point. Everything looks exactly the way I remember it but brighter, and more heavily decorated. Over the years I've added more decorations.

I run my fingers over the vivid, pastel rainbow walls covered with self made paintings and rhinestones. As for the furniture, there's a bean bag in the corner I added when I was eight, a dresser from five years ago, a couch from recently, and so much more. So many memories. So many good times. How could I ever abandon that? This is my world. It's all mine. Nothing can change that.

My clothes have morphed into that of short, light blue, ripped denim overalls. One strap hangs off my shoulder, exposing more of the plain white t-shirt underneath. I look in the bedazzled mirror and find doodles of stars and flowers all over my body. Blue and pink highlighted curls join my blonde ones, sparkling in the sunset that illuminates my room. Evren is right. I look like a cupcake. And I love it.

I make my way towards the easel in the center of the room. I sit at the stool as I take out a paint brush and dip it into a bucket of pink paint, not caring how messy I am or how much of it drips onto the floor. It adds charisma to the room.

I slash angry paint strokes onto the otherwise empty canvas, letting my fury soak into the cotton. Each stroke is more vivid and enraged than the last. Layers of pink, orange, and yellow spell out the emotions I can't explain with words. Or rather, I don't know how.

"How could he?! He thinks I'll just immediately accept his new girlfriend as my step-mom?! Well then he's wrong! She SLAUGHTERED any chance that they would work it out. That we could be a family again. I'll never forgive her." My thoughts scream.

I pause and take a deep breath, calming my racing heart. The chaotic splatters of paint on the canvas glare at me. Yikes. Time for damage control. I pull out a thinner paint brush and start painting more methodically. Every stroke is with intent now, every tear but a memory. This is my world. I control what happens.

The paint has become unusually thick, with a light stickiness to it that I can't explain. And I can't tell if it's just my imagination but the walls seem to be moving. The colors swirl ever so slightly, like clouds moving

across the sky, inch by inch, and now there's this strange tension hanging in the air. It feels...uncomfortable. And there's this creeping sense that I don't belong here. Like I'm in *danger*. I shake it off, reminding myself that I'm in control. "*I'm safe.*"

I turn my attention back to my painting and add another careful swipe. To my horror the paint sticks to the canvas like slime. It clings to my brush as I pull it off the canvas, oozing onto the floor. The canvas and easel itself has also started melting, creating a puddle of goo on the floor. I drop my paint brush and, on instinct, place my feet on the floor behind me, planning to scoot my chair back.

A soft squelch sounds from underneath my feet. I shoot up from the stool and take a step back, finding that my chair is also melting into goo. The paint on the walls are mixing together into a tie dye pattern, liquifying into goo. The paintings and decorations are drowning in the chaos, the goo absorbing everything in its path and merging with the melting furniture. The once friendly colors, now malicious.

I take a step back, noticing how stiff my ankles feel. I look down in a panic and discover that the goo I stepped in has crawled its way up to my ankles. I look around for the portal door but it's gone. The goo has now spread around my calf, locking my ankles in place. So I walk painfully slow, careful not to trip, until I'm standing where the portal should be. But instead of staring at a glowing, pink and purple portal I'm staring at a wall.

A goo arm shoots out from the wall, in an attempt to grab me. I jump back with a yelp, falling to the floor straight into more goo. I scramble up off the floor, desperately trying to rip the goo off my clothes but it's no use. Within minutes I'm locked into a suit of goo, unable to move a muscle as it creeps up my neck.

I watch as full bodies made of the goo stare at me from inside, practically camouflaged. One of them holds up my melting mirror and aims it at me so I can see myself in it. I can see I'm becoming one of them.

I was wrong. I don't control anything.

At any moment the world around me can become hostile. At any moment a safe space can crumble. Because safe spaces are imaginary. And so is family. And I can't control something imaginary.

"ARCHER!!!!" Evren suddenly appears from behind me, grabbing my hand and dragging me out.

"Evren?! EVREN WAIT, I CAN'T MOVE!!!" I screech, expecting my stiff body to fall to the floor. Instead, my legs feel free, the goo dripping off my body. He forces me along, dodging goo figures and crashing into a wall, revealing the portal. It was there the whole time. I just couldn't see it.

He jumps through it, and I follow.

We crash to the forest floor. We lay there for a minute while we catch our breath, letting the adrenaline wear off. But one noise from the still very open portal and we are on our feet again, running back home.

ONE YEAR LATER

I haven't been back here in a while. Everything looks exactly the way I remember it. Lush grass, spiky rocks, sunlight filtering through the trees, big purple and pink portal staring back at me. "*Hello...old friend.*"

“We don’t have to do this today. We can come back another day.” Evren reminds me, but I want to do this. I *need* to do this. “It’s ok. I’m ready.” I assure him. Then, I take a deep breath and take a step forward. I closed my eyes and take deep breaths as I ground myself, acknowledging the ground beneath my feet. The memory of goo around my ankles flashes through my mind, and for a second it feels like I’m back in that room again. But I’ve been through this before. This is what I trained for.

I focus instead on the feeling of my clothes against my skin. Another flashback of me being in the suit of goo. My whole body tenses up. I feel the alarm bells going off in my body. The urge to scream, to run, is unbearable but I can do this. I know I can do this. So I power through, turning my attention to something less triggering. I listen to the birds and feel the wind against my face as I regain control of my breath.

A couple months ago I talked to my parents about how I felt. I realized that even if they got back together, we still wouldn’t be a family due to the fact that neither of them would ever be happy, and that’s ok. They don’t need to be married for us to be a family. But, I never realized that while I don’t have control over everything in my life, my friends and family will always be here for me. And so will the exit. I just have to choose it. And that’s exactly what I’m doing.

I think back to all the memories I had in my little world and all the joy it brought me. I’ll always cherish those memories. But it’s time to let go. When I’m finished, I whisper a single sentence, with complete belief.

“I don’t need you anymore.”

When I open my eyes the portal is gone. I turn to Evren, his proud smile meeting my ecstatic one. As we turn to leave, I turn back to where the portal once was and decide to say one last thing. “Goodbye.”

Behind the tree, a goo figure stares back at me.