

Waves

By Charlotte Durham

Ella rolled over, unable to sleep. She could hear the waves splashing on the beach. They drew back again, crashing powerfully every time. She could almost feel the the wave, the water drawn up to its full height, trying to prove itself. It would fall, ride up the beach, tumble to its full extent, reaching, but always drawn back to the vast ocean. Soon the water would hit the hundred-foot-tall Wall then fall back. Against every wave, the Wall prevailed.

The Wall marked the end of the beach and the beginning of Community 14. It was a giant wall, the bottom half smoothed like cold metal. There were no windows, doors, or openings of any kind in the giant mass. No one went beyond the Wall. The community contained everything its members needed. The Wall towered over the community with such enormity that no one thought to consider the existence of anything beyond it.

No one, that is, except for one small girl with dusty brown hair: Ella.

Ella listened to the waves. She had never seen waves, but she imagined what they looked like.

A light caught her eye. A voice emerged, coming from a small whirring ball hovering nearby. Ella was used to these monitors; they were quite a normal aspect of her community. The devices were placed systematically around every outside path and planter. Every community member also had a personal monitor that followed them everywhere. As a child, Ella had been quite unsocial, and often considered her monitor a pet or a friend. But now she found it annoying.

“Ella, may I help you to your bed?” it asked.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Ella replied irritably.

“And?” urged the calm voice.

“So, I sat by the window and stared out at the Wall.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Lying is a transgression, you know.” Ella could see now that she was no longer speaking with the mechanical brain of a monitor, but a member of the Department of Community Regulation (D.C.R.) speaking through the screen of a monitor.

“I didn’t lie.”

“I hope not,” it replied nonchalantly. The warning tone made Ella relent.

“I was thinking of what’s—beyond.... The waves—”

“There is nothing for you beyond the Wall, Ella.” The voice was cold and firm, rather than calm. Ella wavered before her eyes closed and she fell.

* * *

“Hurry, Ella!” her father said. “You have five minutes to get ready!” Ella rolled out of bed. After morning meal, she walked to join her group in the daily routine.

“You are reminded that Community 14’s motto is...”

Ella recited the motto.

Once Ella joined her group, she spotted her friend, Stella. The sight of her short brown curls brought a smile to Ella’s face and a light to her eyes.

“Stella!” Ella hurried over to join the group.

“Hi Ella, where’ve you been?”

“Ella got slightly sidetracked on the way here from her housing unit,” interjected Ella’s monitor. Ella wanted to smack her monitor and its stupid mechanical voice. Stella was her friend. Why couldn’t she talk to her and tell her where she’d been? Why couldn’t she do what she wanted without technology biting at her heels? Ella wanted to be rid of it, she wanted to be free. But there was a Wall in the way.

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Later that night, Ella lay in bed. Her monitor hovered in the far corner of the room. The lights were dimmed, except for a lamp on her nightstand. Ella’s monitor’s reading alarm sounded. “Finish the sentence,” it advised. Then it swooped down, picked up the book, inserted a book mark, and placed it on the nightstand.

“Good night, Ella,” spoke her monitor.

Ella rolled over. Her monitor went back to its resting place in the corner. The door opened and Ella’s father came in, his monitor close behind.

“Hi Ella” he said.

“Hi Dad” answered Ella.

“How was your day?” he asked genuinely.

“Normal” was Ella’s indifferent reply.

“Right. Well, it’s bedtime. Would you like a story?” Ella rolled over to face her Dad. There was a smile on his face, but something else too. Was it excitement?

“Sure.” Ella snuggled into bed, ready to hear her father’s story.

“This is the story of—” he began, then glanced at the monitors. If technology can look bored and impatient, these monitors did now. But Ella knew they were listening.

“—of Alsa. Once upon a time, there was a small boy living in a community much different than ours. This small boy was fascinated by a simple clock. Ticking, telling time, keeping everyone on track....”

Ella’s Dad told how this small boy believed that technology could do much more if programmed correctly. He dreamed of robots doing everything for us. He dreamed of robots adding to humanity, being our friends, enabling people to live forever. He dreamed of a world that was perfect, and robots made it so. So Alsa built. He made technology that supplied us with everything we needed, robots that aided, guided, provided, enforced. Alsa read, planned, created, and monitored. When Alsa was 34 years old, his work was finished.

“Alsa was the creator of a new age, of a new community—” He concluded. “You should be getting to sleep now. Here.” Ella’s Dad handed her a piece of old, brown paper. “This explains the rest.” Ella took the paper, intrigued. “Goodnight,” he said, kissing her on the forehead. “I want you to be happy.” Ella noticed a gleam in his eye as he stood up and left the room. She was surprised the monitors didn’t inspect the paper further, but she would. Though her reading time was up, she felt an urge to find out what the paper was. Something about the story her father told intrigued her. She remembered her father’s words, Ella, I want you to be happy. And the gleam in his eye. She wanted to be happy too.

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“Stella!” Ella whispered. “It’s me!” Stella sat bolt upright.

“Ella! What are you doing here?”

“It’ll take a lot of explaining...”

“You’ll get in SO much trouble! Where’s your monitor?”

“You won’t understand this, but here, this might explain.” Ella handed Stella the paper. “Read the back.”

“Whoa, this is...a map! Of...wait, this is our community! There’s the Wall, the housing units, the Main Building! All the monitors! Ella, where’d you get this?”

“Read the back.” Ella insisted.

“How to shut down monitors.” Stella read, “First, tap twice on the head with a small stick, then place the stick on the button underneath. While doing this, say, ‘Alsa technology.’”

“Who’s Alsa?” Stella asked.

“The founder of this community. ‘Alsa technology’” Ella tapped Stella’s monitor with a pencil.

“Step 2: Say ‘founded this community’” Ella did so. “When the door on the monitor slides open, type in Alsa’s birth-year.”

“What year was Alsa born?” Ella asked.

“Wait. Our community was founded in the year 6529, and Alsa was 34 at that time, so his birth-year must be...3125!” Ella typed into Stella’s monitor, and it went blank and fell to the ground.

“Stella, listen to me. I’ve found a way out. I’m tired of being pushed around by technology. I’m leaving and I want to do it with a friend.” She paused, then with a smile, said, “and I’m not a very fast runner.”

Stella smiled. “I am.” She grabbed Ella’s hand, and the two of them jumped through the window, adrenaline pumping.

The landing was not graceful. A street monitor turned in their direction, whirring closer. Ella and Stella shrunk into the shadows, holding their breath. Stella cocked her head toward the street. Ella understood. Their only hope was to run. There was a tug on her arm, and Ella was running. They needed to consult the map. They paused behind a waste can and looked at the map. Ella charted a route to the spot she’d circled, the secret door in the Wall. They surged forward. More monitors joined the chase.

Ella pumped her legs, faster and faster. The cloud of monitors grew closer. If they caught her... She didn’t want to think of what would happen then. She was doing this for her father, for Stella, for herself.

They rounded a corner, and Stella pulled Ella into a waste bin. They watched, terrified but determined, as a crowd of D.C.R. Police and monitors rushed by.

“How do we get beyond the Wall?” whispered Stella.

“I’m not sure...” replied Ella. “It doesn’t say...”

“We have to go. They’ll come back down this alley.” The girls pushed up the lid and climbed out.

“If you see something on the Wall, push.” Ella offered.

“Um...okay...” but there was no time for clarification. They heard the D.C.R. Police.

“Run.” The fugitives bolted out of the alley, monitors closing in on all sides. Ella could see the Wall and knew they had to go for it. If they gave up now, it was over.

“Stella! Get to the Wall!” Determination filled Ella as she ran straight at the monitors.

Ella surged forward, batting away monitors like mosquitos. More monitors were coming, with the D.C.R. Police behind. The monitor’s voices were a blur, and all Ella could see was the Wall.

“Stella! Forget the monitors, go forward.” Stella understood. Ella dropped her arms and with the last of her strength and willpower, ran forward. The Wall grew closer, but so did the monitors. Then, SMACK! She hit the Wall, its smooth surface cold to the touch.

“Stella, keep the monitors away! I’ll look for the door!” She had no idea what she was looking for, but frantically started feeling along the Wall for any crack or engraving, anything that wasn’t cold, smooth wall.

After long moments of frantic searching, Ella closed her eyes. Alsa was 34, she thought. Where would a 34-year-old's arm reach? Ella jumped, her hand still on the Wall. She felt something. She jumped again. There was something that hadn't been smoothed off. Squinting, Ella saw a circle with two lines in it, figures around the circle.

"A clock!" she shouted. "Stella, pick me up!"

"What?" Stella's arms and face were scratched and bruised from the monitors.

"I found the door. I need to be as tall as a 34-year-old man!" Stella crouched down, and Ella got on her shoulders. As Stella stood up, Ella reached the clock easily.

"Push!" shouted Stella. Ella pushed, but it wasn't enough.

"Ella, think of...think of...courage! Strength! Please!" Ella put her hand on the clock. She remembered her father, his kind smile and loving care. He wanted her to be happy, to be free. A surge of love washed over her, and she stood up and pushed. The door opened.

Ella threw herself through.

"Stella! Come on!" Stella looked up, her strength and determination gone. A police robot was a foot away, about to scoop her up. "NO!" Ella grabbed her friend's arm, and pulled. She rolled the door into place, cutting off the monitors and robots. The Wall's door closed.

The Wall marked the end of her community and the beginning of the beach. The Wall kept the continual splashing of water separate from the daily routine. The Wall went hundreds of feet into the ground and the sky, intimidating, forbidding. And Ella and Stella were on the other side of it.

Ella turned around, exhausted. But she couldn't close her eyes – they were fixed, full of wonder, on the ocean's magnificent waves.

"We were told there was nothing out here for us." Ella remarked. "I wonder what is out here."

"Whatever it is, let's explore it together," said Stella.

Ella looked at the Wall, solid and unyielding. There's no going back on your decisions it seemed to tell her. She didn't want to. Ella looked at her friend. She laughed. She wiggled her toes in the wet sand.

The two girls—two adventurers, two friends—leaned against each other, watching dawn break on a brilliant new day.