

There are fires burning all over Earth and Debra is sitting in a computer chair playing Tetris. Debra is not sedentary like the rest of her family, but she has been sitting in this chair for the past 72 hours mostly, taking breaks only to take in or release water or to get nutrient packs from the storage room. To do this she has to sneak through the family room, where her father and stepmother and older brother all sit on a couch still and slack-jawed and sated by intravenous tubes, but their backs are towards her and she moves as quickly and quietly as she can. They never turn around.

The problem is that Debra is getting bored of Tetris, which is, for some reason that probably has to do with geopolitical conflict and the Russians, the only game that's installed on the primitive networked console in the communications room. There are a lot more games on the consoles at school, but Debra has stopped going to school and doesn't plan on going again, ever. So she has to figure out something else to do.

At 7:45 AM each day a strident electronic voice admonishes her, "Debra, your shuttle will arrive in 5 minutes," and Debra slides off the computer chair to pretend to leave. She walks in front of the TV in the family room so that everyone will be sure to see her. "Ha'aa guh dayya shcooo, hunneh," her stepmother slurs, without moving her mouth. At 7:50 AM the foyer door slides open and a single empty seat in a one-person autonomous vehicle glares at her accusatorily. Debra just smiles and doesn't get in. At 7:51 AM the door slides shut again.

Over the past three days the drugs have been wearing off and Debra is getting increasingly energetic. Today when the foyer doors slide shut she blows a quick raspberry at the

departing shuttle, before catching herself – she can't make any sound! The unfinished raspberry stays stuck in her mouth for a few minutes and tickles her tongue so terribly that she has to scrunch her eyes shut and clench her fists and her whole body for a little bit in a complete effort to stifle it. She just can't stay still – she has to move!

Next to the foyer door there is a big red button, which Debra has naturally never considered pressing before. It is suddenly looking very interesting. Debra, itching with the mad desire to move her body parts in any way at all, punches out with her hand and pushes the button with three outstretched fingers. The door opens. The shuttle is no longer there. The foyer's dim green light illuminates the first foot of same-looking ground beyond and then is quickly swallowed up by the dark. Debra doesn't think – she darts through the door. She thinks she can make a wall out across from her but to her left and right it is impossible to see what exists. It seems like a very long tunnel. The foyer door slides shut behind her and she's plunged into the total dark.

Debra screams. Not because she feels afraid – that doesn't happen until after she screams. As soon as she screams she claps her hands over her mouth and shrieks again, muffled, in delight and in fear. What if her parents heard her? They are sitting right on the other side of that door! She has never heard sound through that door, and she has never seen either of her parents stand up, but she's suddenly terrified that the sound of her scream may have carried, and they'll stand up now, open the door, and pull her back inside. Nothing could be worse. So as soon as she screams she claps her hand over her mouth, screams again, and then runs, to get as far from the doors and the possibility of being pulled back in as she can.

Running is so much fun! The tunnel, which she could tell was very long, is incredibly straight and level. Debra runs through the dark until she is dizzy and out of breath, which doesn't take very long, then collapses on the ground so short of breath that laughing hurts. She laughs anyways though. She starts crying but she's happy. She lies there crying and laughing and trying to breathe for a little bit, feeling safely out of range of danger, and entirely full of wonder. To leave the house! To go into the dark! To run and run and never be stopped by walls or rules or sedative drugs!! To have an infinite – or at least a very, very, long – space! She cannot believe it is here. It has been here all along!

She rolls over on the ground and kisses it. “Wonderful ground!” she compliments it. “Thank you!” Her breath is coming a little more normally. She pushes herself up onto her hands and knees and tries to orient herself. She wants to know just how wide this space is. She wants to know just how long.

The width is easier to determine so she begins with that. She crawls to where the ground slopes up and then stands up. She turns around and presses her back to the wall. She stands as straight as she can against the wall, and then marches out forward as regularly and evenly as she can, legs straight, like a toy soldier, so that her steps are perfectly measured. She counts every footfall. She walks down a small slope, then across level ground, then up a slope again. She stops when the wall rises up so that she can turn around and fit her back against it again. The tunnel took her six steps to cross.

She marvels at this small fact for a while. Then she jumps up and down for no reason. She wants to yell again! Or maybe run. She is so overwhelmed with possibilities that she doesn't even know what to do. She just laughs. This is so much more fun than being in school. She yells, and runs, and jumps up and down, sometimes at different times, sometimes all at once. She rolls around. She does somersaults on the flat ground, and, for fun, on the slope-y ground. She wishes she could do a handstand. She had a friend at school who could do handstands, she thinks suddenly. This thought makes her sad. Eventually she just walks.

As she walks, she trails her hand along the wall. It is hard and smooth. It feels the same as the walls in her home. She wonders if it looks the same. It would be wonderful to see things, she thinks, a little sadly. Debra's hand, trailing along the wall, is suddenly not touching anything. She stops and turns, reaches out with both hands. No wall! She reaches up and down. Just air. It's another tunnel! She is amazed and delighted. The first tunnel was so much fun. Maybe this one will be even better. She is not sure where it will go but she decides to find out. She takes her first turn and enters this tunnel.

She checks the dimensions again, the same way she did before. This tunnel is only three big steps across. She reaches up over her head and can't feel a ceiling. She jumps and her fingers graze something. She feels cozier in this tunnel, more sure of where all the boundaries are. She runs a little in here too, and then decides to keep her fingers on the wall to see if there will be more chances to turn.

There are more chances to turn. And she turns at most of them. Every time she turns, she checks the dimensions of the new tunnel that she ends up in. The tunnels vary in size, but most of them are this smaller, cozier size – the walls just out of reach when she stretches her arms out, the ceiling just out of reach when she stretches her arms up. Sometimes she doesn't take a turn when she can. Sometimes she walks with her hands touching the wall on the right, sometimes on her left. She lets her whims guide her. Why should she be guided by anything else? There is, at long last, nobody and nothing telling her what she should do and she celebrates this fact by doing things as arbitrarily as she possibly can. She loses track of how many rights she makes and how many lefts. She loses track of how long she has been walking. She walks and talks.

“Nice tunnel,” she talks, much more loudly than is necessary. “Were you lonely? You are such great fun but nobody else is even noticing you! Everybody just sits inside watching T.V.” She is overcome with the sudden urge to hug the wall. She actually tries to, although it's very awkward. “They are all on drugs,” she whispers to the wall, her cheek smashed up against it. She heard that once, from her friend at school. She keeps thinking about her friend from school. “Does anybody else ever come here?” She asks the tunnel. The tunnel doesn't answer.

The tunnels are getting smaller. At some points she is on her hands and knees, crawling through a tunnel with a ceiling too low to even stand up. The sides of the tunnel are no longer smooth. The ground is bumpy and hurts her knees a little. She wants to keep moving. “Where do you go to?” She asks, but it doesn't answer. It is nice to hear her own voice though. Whenever she talked before, people would tell her to keep her voice down. “We're trying to watch T.V. here!” Now she can talk as much as she wants.

But Debra is beginning to feel strange. She has been in this tunnel for a very long time now and she is running out of ways to play with it. When she gets tired, she takes short naps. But she has been hungry and she wants water. She wants to see something. She wants the tunnel to talk back to her. She wants to find something interesting. She wants the ground to stop hurting her knees.

“Well, do you want to go back?” the tunnel asks her.

“No!” she shouts.

She feels the tunnel shake, as if with laughter.

Debra’s head hurts. The tunnel is no longer level – sometimes she feels like she is crawling uphill, sometimes downhill. She can’t go back. Not just because she wouldn’t be able to remember the way. But also because she chose to leave. She hates it there. She hates her family. She hates school. She hates being poked with needles and yelled at. She hates always being told to sit still. Anything would be better than going back.

“Even dying?” the tunnel asks her.

“YES,” she yells, although she doesn’t know exactly what dying is. In defiance, she starts doing somersaults again, even though the uneven ground hurts her back now when she does. She

laughs loudly, as if she is still having fun. She feels her eyes start to burn a little with hot tears. She doesn't like these too-close, oppressive, unfriendly, uneven walls. Why did the tunnels get smaller? She sits up against a wall and cries a little. It's not like the tunnel can see her cry. It's too dark. But she doesn't sit and cry for long, because she can't stay still. Why did she leave her home, if not to see where the world goes? Why did she leave her home, if she was just going to sit still? She has to move.

She stops to sleep more often now. She lays down where she is and feels her heart beating fast angry and nervous in her chest, her mouth dry and sad, her knees smarting. She puts her hands under her head and curls up on her side, sleeps for some indeterminate amount of time, and wakes up with her mouth drier and her head more painful. Her stomach hurts for a while, like it is being twisted tighter and tighter, and then all of the pain just sort of combines and becomes one big body ache, and then it feels like everything is a headache, and then she is just a dry mouth.

How can people just go away sometimes? Debra doesn't like this anymore. Where do they go? There is no food or water in the tunnel. What is she supposed to do?

The tunnel is laughing at her. It's trembling. Or she's trembling. All of her body is shaking, and the whole world is shaking. She presses her cheek up against the tunnel's insistent wall again, as though looking for some affection. The tunnel's walls are only suffocating. She feels the tunnel pulse against her cheek. Her head is throbbing. Her eyes are hot again, like there should be tears, but they are dry and scratchy and no tears come. She sobs but her breath just

rattles and chokes in her dry throat and the sound comes out like a bad cough. Stretching her mouth to cry makes her bottom lip split and start bleeding.

Debra tries to remember how she got here. She was sitting in a computer chair. She was playing Tetris and she was bored. She had to move. The drugs were wearing off. Everyone was watching TV. She didn't want to go to school. She wants water. She wants to know. How could people just go away? When she closes her eyes she thinks she can see an interconnected map of tunnels in bright red against the darkness, like a maze. Where did they go? Her friend from school made mazes in class. And she went into a tunnel. Drew them on the sides of papers, and had Debra try to solve them. Debra had to move. Debra always followed the walls. Debra closes her eyes and sees lines snaking across each other, over and under and through each other, and imagines that they are all tunnels. And everyone was watching TV. She just slipped through the door. She was bored. She was sitting in a computer chair and playing Tetris. She scrunches her eyes shut tight and that makes some of the tunnels burn bright red in her vision. When she opens her eyes she thinks she can still see all of the tunnels pulsing red. She just slipped through the door, for the first time. She just wants water. Pulsing like the body of the tunnel. Her vision seems to be all wrong, crisscrossed with all these red lines. It's dark and she shouldn't see anything. Debra tries to remember how she got here. She can't think, her heart beat sounds too loud in her ears. It beats the way the tunnel seems to beat.

None of it makes sense. Debra, dehydrated, just tries to remember where she is. She is so confused. She is in a tunnel with a ceiling just high enough for her to stand. She staggers along it, using the wall for support. The air feels heavy and oppressive. She is sure that it is pushing into



her. The tunnel is beating and moving the air so it assaults her over and over. Wherever she is it does not want her to be here. It is trying to beat her back. She won't go back. She hears laughter, voices. She wonders if it's her friend from school. She tries to call out but her throat is too dry and she has no voice. She tries to run towards the voices and trips. The voices and laughter disappear.

When the tunnels branch and fork now she chooses the branch that pulses stronger. The tunnel is telling her where to go. She has to trust it. "You have your own heart," she wants to tell it, but she can't even whisper. Sound comes out of her mouth only as a crackling hiss, and it hurts to make that sound. So she just thinks it to the tunnel. The tunnel must understand. The tunnel is a living being – Debra knows it – the tunnel is a mighty thing – Debra feels it. The shuddering of the walls. The heavy heartbeat. She hears its heart slamming through the tunnel walls and she follows the sound and she doesn't understand anything.

Debra is dying – she thinks she gets it now – but she doesn't stop moving. She can hardly remember anything about who she is or where she is or why she is here but she knows she has to move. She oozes forward slowly and increasingly uncoordinatedly like magic animated clay that is losing its shape. Her face feels deformed, her cheeks are sagging to the floor, and her head is too heavy. Her awareness is slipping from her. She knows less and less about who she is every moment. She is playing Tetris but all of the pieces that she packed neatly into boxes on the bottom rows are decomposing and drifting upwards and apart. The pieces aren't even falling down anymore, and they aren't even pieces. They are just small blocks of color floating aggravatingly away from everything and they won't move the way she tells them to and all of

her points are undoing themselves. Sensations reach her in no sensible order; she may feel pain and then later understand her hand is pressing into a sharp rock, and she may first experience herself flattened on the ground before remembering her elbows collapsing. Her tongue's swollenness keeps resurfacing in her consciousness and sticking to the roof of her mouth. She knows – although she doesn't know anything else – that she is still moving forward. This knowledge reverberates ever-stronger in her body, which exists more than her mind at this point, because the tunnel's heartbeat is getting more and more powerful. It is stronger than hers now, and more regular. It is overwhelming in fact. Her heartbeat feels faint and jumpy and pathetic and she is terrified that it is being entirely subsumed by the tunnel's brutal existence. She tries to say something to the tunnel but she can't talk. She tries to think something to the tunnel but she can't think. She wants to ask it if it is taking her heartbeat from her because where else could it be getting a heartbeat from and why else would hers be going away. She wants to but she can't string the thought together in her head. She knows it but she doesn't know. The tunnel's heart beats strong.

Debra had a friend from school who died. That's what the adults said but she didn't really know exactly what they meant by that. Then. One day Debra's friend just stopped coming to school and Debra really couldn't see any reason that she should go either. She didn't like getting poked by needles anyways and she hated sitting still. Why shouldn't she go away from that? Debra wondered. It was natural that she should go away. Where else should she go? She wanted to know where this tunnel went. It felt like she was at the bottom of a hill now and she was sure she was too weak to climb up this one. The tunnel was so small that her shoulders touched either edge of it and it was loud and it felt like it was hugging her. She thought she saw light far ahead

but her eyes were making all sorts of weird visions. She had to move. She was pulling herself and or the tunnel was pushing her. She was shaking and or the tunnel was shaking her. And everything was getting louder and her head was splitting open and or her lips were bleeding out and the tunnel was alive and or Debra was dying and she had to move and with a final violent lurch she made it – there was light everywhere and there was a wide open space and all of the people were there and everyone was playing and everyone was moving and everyone was laughing and everyone was yelling and for the first time in her entire life Debra heard the sweet, high sound of music.