

Free?

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Wilbert M. finally got a clearance letter to leave Unit D after a month of secluded incarceration with the air of the stale inpatient balloon as his lungs' only source of second-hand oxygen. Upon exiting through the main locked doors of the upper unit, he descends to street level and beholds large Red Oak trees that shelter frolicking squirrels playfully chasing each other up and down the tree trunks. Feeling the ever-present haze of medication, Wilbert walks toward the main streets to the north and is hit by the frenzy of fast moving vehicles and ambient city lights.

After walking along Gunner St., he ducks into the underground with barely enough change to take a subway ride across town and back. Descending down below through a flight of stairs at first, and then an escalator, Wilbert snakes his way through some subterranean corridors after paying his fare and finds the proper platform. Once on the platform, he awaits his train's approach and boards a crowded car after hearing the familiar door chime. Inside the cramped subway car, he holds onto the pole as the train hurls itself into the dark, passing fail-safe lights and only pausing briefly to unload and load the old and new commuters at each upcoming station. Wanting to blend in amid the passengers on-board, Wilbert avoids eye contact and feels a tad self-conscious by the slightly tattered rags he is wearing on his first and monumental day out of the hospital. Upon reaching Carousel Station, he maneuvers himself through the throng near the door and ekes his way out of the car before the doors close shut. After emerging from the underground, he walks up to the main streets again and heads toward the ferris wheel near the gateway to Littleton Fair. After going through one of the fair's two main gates, he again finds himself amid a large crowd and loses himself in the bustling atmosphere of games and rides where loud noises and sirens abound, jarring his slightly sensitive nerves. After walking past a magician performing tricks in the centre of a crowded oval, Wilbert follows a chair lift overhead continuing his course to the other side of the city fair. Feeling a sense of 'apartness' in the confines of the fair, he goes to a concession stand to buy a package of Cracker Jack and a cold beverage. He then sits down in the shade where kids are playing bumper cars. Watching the cars stop and go and ram into one another like jousting bucks, Wilbert finishes his snack fully aware that he has already spent most of the money in his pocket for his day out. Feeling a bit of fatigue and boredom setting in, he heads out of Littleton Fair through the opposite gate, noticing the large stone angels upon his exit. In an effort to save money for his return, Wilbert starts to walk towards Mangrove Park instead of taking transit, and begins to cross over a bridge to enter the park through the southeast entrance. On his way over, he peers over a barrier on one side where cars on the expressway are wizzing by, and temporarily imagines himself hopping over the edge and landing atop the blurred speeding vehicles. After his slightly deluded thoughts pass, he crosses the bridge and walks toward the park gates deciding to go into the zoo to check out the emus and the other captive fauna. Upon entering the park gates, he passes the large memorial dedicated to Ralph Templeton, one of the park's founders, and heads uphill noticing an arrow directing park users toward the zoo. Passing a large fountain with a children's play castle nearby, Wilbert enters through a shaded fenced gateway into the public park zoo. Walking between the enclosures on both side, he settles in by the

fence where a group of llamas are feeding from a trough. Suddenly hit by a wave of emotion, a tear runs down Wilbert's cheek as he notices the small enclosure around the animals, feeling as though he is peering into his own psychiatric cell at Mossy Glenn Mental Health Facility where he barely had room for shuffling around in a vain attempt to undertake a form of stationary exercise. After reflecting upon his own plight as a caged biped of sorts, Wilbert leaves the llama enclosure and follows around a lone peacock, strutting its large fan tail as it walks clumsily toward the other end of the small zoo, passing the emu enclosure on its way. The bird suddenly made him think of Horatio P., a fellow patient on his unit, who always enjoyed dressing up in colorful and flamboyant costumes to dazzle the nurses on staff. After reaching the last enclosure where the bison were held, Wilbert exits the zoo, looking at his watch and noticing he is an hour away from his daily curfew. Picking up his pace just slightly, he walks through the park, taking the path along the pond at its south end and passes some fishermen who are casting lines like poker players throwing their chips into the chance waters. After seeing a lady 'fisherman' pulling up a small catch of resplendent shiny scales wriggling in her hands, Wilbert continues along the pond's trails, noticing chipmunks racing across the path ahead to duck into a burrow dug straight into the retaining wall. Once again the animals made him wonder whether he was truly free in a world where medication felt more like an invisible leash and freedom from a locked ward amounted at its best to a mandatory curfew at dusk with only a small cell and window to stare out at the outside world. Peering into a chipmunk burrow up ahead, Wilbert wonders what it would be like to shrink down to size and be a rodent in Mangrove Park for a day or two. Continuing through the pond trail, he notices a park trolley and moves off the path to his right as it passes with its six or seven tethered cars, ringing a loud familiar bell for the kids to hear. Finally, Wilbert reaches the southwest side of the park and exits through the old wrought-iron gate on his way to Mangrove Station. Upon noticing the sign for the subway underground, he waits at a traffic light observing the natural rhythms of the city halting and starting their cyclical flow all over again. He then crosses the street once red turns to green through an electrical binomial equation linked to a set of clockwork rhythms. Just before heading back down into the underground due to his lateness, he notices a building with an electronic sign flashing updates of the latest numbers and trends at the stock market. Numbers that cascade and flow like a digital river of stronger or weaker numerical outcomes. A world in constant flux, with its respective worker humanoids donning suit attire, carrying fancy briefcases and incessantly thumbing their electronic gadgetry. These same thoughts made him reach into his pocket to count the remainder of his change before diving down below ground again to commute at a quickened pace. Feeling a little dizzy and slightly disoriented for some reason, he inserts the change into the transit token receptacle and passes through the turn style gate perceiving a seemingly stern look from the transit attendant. After hearing an update over the intercom, he sees a transit operator by the Eastbound platform talking into his walkie-talkie and is hit with a certain malaise of paranoia and anxiety. Hoping that these so-called spies around him will subside, he reaches the platform determined not to float about but to stay grounded as the train makes its approach from a distant station. Soon, a rumble can be heard from the darkened tunnel and the train lumbers into the station slowing down to a halt. It sings its usual chime and Wilbert feels funneled inside all over again. The doors close and the sounds of

jarred metallic wheels can be heard as the train lurches forward with slight turns, putting a strain on its sleek and compact engineering. Following the ebb and flow of an imaginary underground critter-populace, Wilbert finds his way back to Gunner St. Station and exits a burrow opening to reappear above-ground. Soon after, he feels the familiarity of Mossy Glenn's lawn acreage all over again and enters through the gaping mouth of Unit D feeling like a worm captured by a spring Robin at dusk. Two more minutes from curfew and it's almost dinner time. Not to mention the time for another nightly shot of "Relaxol" before bed to put him in a hazy coma once the persistent hollering and 'new admission commotion' sets in when it's time to sleep.

Fin/The End