

Snapdragon Alley

by Tom Lichtenberg

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Sapphire and Alex

Sapphire was tall for her age, and strong. She was the terror of the fifth grade dodge ball class, but the star of the volleyball team. She was fearless, bold, and constantly in motion. At night she tossed and turned in her sleep and often wound up on the floor along with her blankets. Life for this girl was non-stop adventure, which is why her friend Alex liked to be around her, even if she didn't know when to stop, which could be a problem sometimes. You never knew what it was going to be next, but it was going to be something, that was for sure.

Alex was also ten, and it seemed like they'd known each other forever. They made an odd couple - he was shorter, thinner, and had long shaggy blond hair. From a distance he looked to be the girl and her the boy, with her height and her jet black hair cut short and straight. He was also quieter and by far the more cautious of the two. Alex liked to study things first, puzzle them out, come to an understanding and then mess around. With Sapphire it was jumping in with both feet first and only then considering the consequences.

Together they'd progressed from sandbox to mud puddles, creek walking and ice skating, tree climbing and skate boarding, and every good thing along the way. Now at ten years old they were ready to branch out, see the world, get out there and be life size, even if they weren't quite yet.

"Now's the time", Sapphire declared, and Alex agreed. They'd already decided on code names. She was to be known as Cipher, and he was to be Aleph. It was perfect. Code names first and then disguises and masks. Or maybe not. Cipher was still deciding about that. As for Aleph, he was poring over his collection of official city bus maps, one from each of the past nine years. He had the idea that if you're out to discover the world, a bus map is a decent place to begin.

Spring Hill Lake

Alex took to arranging his bus maps chronologically along his bedroom wall, at a height where he could study them carefully from his upper bunk, and where his little brother Argus could not easily get to them. This led to an endless fascination on the five-year-old's part. He would lie for hours in his lower bunk gazing up at the grids of tiny black lines and bolder red ones as if the secrets of the universe were embedded somewhere in there. Alex knew what all those lines represented, and he was certain they were the key to something more substantial - the way to most efficiently cover the territory.

Alex and Sapphire had different goals in mind for this adventure. Sapphire wanted to go everywhere, or rather, to have been everywhere, on every street. Alex wanted to see everything, to have seen everything, to know what things there were and where. He had a genius for memorization and a desire to fill up his brain cells with tidbits of random knowledge. Sapphire wanted notches on her belt. Her idea was to fan out from where they were, take it one neighborhood at a time, as if it were guerrilla warfare and the surrounding streets were the occupying army. Alex pointed out that this would make their travels that much longer each time. He proposed a more systematic solution; map it out and take the bus. Sapphire had to agree that made a lot more sense.

She had made a list of the streets she'd already been on, and it was a fairly long one. She had relatives in different parts of town, so she could claim substantial portions of those far-flung neighborhoods as conquests. Her list had three columns - the name of the street, a column for her own check marks, and a column for Alex. She figured it counted for both if even only one of them had been there. Alex wasn't so sure about that, but he decided to put off that discussion until later. Alex wanted a strategy. Part of the reason was financial. They would each have to buy a bus pass and that would cost money, so he wanted to make the best use of it.

As he stared at the maps on his wall, he tried to decide how to get it done. Should they cover the farthest regions first, so the job would get easier over time? Should they alternate between remote and distant areas, so they wouldn't get burned out? Should they tackle the safest neighborhoods first, saving the sketchier ones for when they were a little older and more experienced, or should they cross out the bad sections first, just to get them out of the way? He scanned the maps in order from the most recent to the oldest. They were largely the same. Spring Hill Lake was not a huge city, and it hadn't changed much in recent years. Alex didn't even know why he had nine years of bus maps on his wall, only that he liked to skip from one to the next, as if that would freshen his thinking. The bus routes had changed from time to time, it's true, and only the current map was actually useful, but they all gave him ideas. They made him wonder why the 22 no longer went through Skyport, but skirted around it, leaving that neighborhood to the 46 alone. Had demand diminished, and if so, why? Was Skyport not what it used to be?

And how come the 63 went all the way from the southwest to the northeast corner of the city? Was that efficient? That route hadn't changed at all over the nine years he knew about. Was it popular? Would it inconvenience too many people if it were disrupted in any way? He was building up legends about those routes. There once had been someone who could tell him, someone who had known all the answers - his Uncle Charlie, but Charlie wasn't around anymore. He'd been a bus driver, had even driven the 63 once. Alex wished that he could ask him, but all he had now to remember him by were these maps on the wall and some photographs.

The Artist Map

Sapphire's idea was to use highlighter pens to mark up all the streets that she and Alex had "done". Hers would be yellow. His would be blue. That way the ones they did together would be green. Alex smelled a contest and wasn't too big on that idea. Also, he didn't want any of his maps besmirched. He said he would think about it. In the meantime, Sapphire had pestered her dad into bringing home a bus map of her own so that she could get to work in secret, thinking she'd surprise her friend with a fancy presentation. The only problem was she wouldn't know all of his streets so her rendering would be incomplete, but as long as it had all of hers, she'd be happy enough. Her father had just brought home the map the night before, and Sapphire was hiding it in her jacket pocket.

So she sat there fidgeting in the Kirkham boys' bedroom, feeling giddy that she had a secret, and watching Argus watch his brother trace the bus routes with his finger. Sapphire didn't have any brothers or sisters, and had never wanted any, but she did enjoy this little one's company. Argus never said much, and she always wondered why that was. He had the biggest eyes and would sit there on his lower bunk bed half hidden in blankets, just staring and staring at the two bigger kids. Every now and then he'd mutter some word they couldn't understand, and that just made the boy seem even more mysterious to Sapphire. She had concluded that he was actually a cat in human disguise. She figured this was one of the cat's nine lives, that it had chosen to be a boy for life number five, for instance, and that sooner or later, poof! He'd go back to being a cat again.

"We could cover a lot of ground with the old 48", Alex said, showing Sapphire the way on the two year old map. He liked that one the best because of its color scheme, a sort of aqua for the regular routes, and rose for the expresses. Most of the other maps used a more traditional blue and red. This one also had bright green icons for city government buildings and museums, and the index was on the left instead of the right like all the other years. Alex believed that for one year they'd

hired an artist to do the map, but he'd turned out to be a some kind of flake, and they'd chucked him at the end of the year and gone back to the same old bureaucrat they'd had before, a guy that Alex imagined to be a slimy looking beanpole by the name of Jimmy Grundling. Grundling was efficient, but had no taste. That's why Alex preferred the "artist map".

Sapphire didn't believe a word of it, and rolled her eyes whenever Alex brought it up, but Argus had absorbed the notion, and kept the idea in his mind that it was better to be an artist than a bureaucrat, even though he wasn't quite sure what either of those were. He just knew it had something to do with choosing colors.

"The 48 covers Westwind, Martinsgate, and Floridan", Alex was saying. "I've never been any of those places except once we went to Martinsgate when my Dad had to stop off at his office, and that was on 11th Street so I've been here, and here", and he traced the side streets where they'd parked and walked.

"How are we going to keep track?" Sapphire wanted to know, steering the conversation back to her master plan. Alex shrugged. Sapphire, who'd been scheming to do the highlight map entirely on her own and present it with a flourish in the future, was incapable of keeping a secret for even one hour, so she jumped up and yelled,

"Surprise!", and whipped her own new bus map out of her jacket and announced,

"We can use this one for the highlighters!!", and without waiting for Alex's response, she hurried over to his desk, where she spread out the map, pulled the highlighters from another pocket and then had to chase them as they rolled off the desk and spilled onto the floor. She fumbled for the blue one, came up triumphant and proceeded to trace the two blocks where Alex had said he'd been.

"It's a start", Sapphire concluded, and she felt that this was the moment when the adventure would finally begin. Alex sighed from his perch on the bunk and just watched as Sapphire found the yellow and started marking all of "her" streets, the ones she could remember at least, mostly around their neighborhood. All the time she did this she was pronouncing their names, followed by "gotcha" or "did ya", or "been there, done that" and laughing with a snort. After she'd performed several of these little acts, she called out to Alex to come down and help. She needed him to do his or at least tell her which ones were his so that she could mark them up. Alex hated to see a bus map being so abused but realized it was no use trying to contain any of Sapphire's enthusiasms at any time, and anyway, at least his own maps were now safe from her predations.

He climbed down, casually mentioned some street names, including a few obscure ones he knew that she'd have trouble finding by herself, so that finally she had to hand him the marker and let him do his own. Between them they had easily covered all of the immediate neighborhoods, and then there were the usual routes to shops and parks and malls. They also identified some downtown spots they knew they'd been to, but weren't sure exactly how they'd gotten there, so they just colored the places themselves. It wasn't long before they'd exhausted their recollections and stood back, a little dismayed at the smallness of their travels in relation to all the little black lines that remained unmarked.

"We haven't been hardly anywhere", Sapphire moaned.

"We'll get there", Alex reassured her. "I mean, that's the plan, right?"

"I didn't know there were so many of them", she sighed.

Alex was thinking that probably most of those streets would not be very interesting, just houses mainly. Maybe it would count if they only turned the corner on those, and didn't have to go down them all the

way. He doubted Sapphire would go for that. She would call it cheating, at least at first.

"Did you get your bus pass?" she asked, and Alex nodded. They'd had to work on their parents to let them use their allowance for that. Neither Alex's parents nor Sapphire's dad were happy with the idea, which they'd tried but failed to keep a secret. There were parts of the city that the parents had marked Forbidden, and forced the kids to agree.

"At least until we're older", they'd promised, which to them meant as early as the next day, because, after all, it was true that tomorrow they'd be older than they were today!

"Okay, then", Sapphire said. "Then we're off" and she was gone from the room in a flash, leaving Alex to fold up her map and put the highlighters in his own jacket pocket. Sapphire would never have remembered them until it was far too late.

By the time he got to the front door, she was already on the sidewalk, stamping her feet, and wondering why it was taking him so long. She was, as ever, ready for anything.

The 48 Martinsgate

To get to the 48 they had to walk three blocks, turn left, walk another two, and wait at the stop. There were no published schedules for the buses, not even online. You just had to know, and Alex had a pretty good idea about this one, because he'd been staking it out, doing research. It was a Monday, a holiday so they had no school, and on Holiday Mondays the 48 Martinsgate East ran approximately every twenty minutes after rush hour. Which twenty minutes was any body's guess. Sometimes it arrived around the 0, 20 and 40. Sometimes it was shifted by five or ten minutes either way. Alex had not yet determined a definitive pattern, if there was one.

Fortunately, when they got there, they could see that at least they hadn't just missed one. Several adults were also gathered at the stop, which was a good sign. The grownups were likelier to arrive on time. The ultimate good luck was when one of the adults whipped out a lighter and lit his cigarette. That was almost a guarantee that the bus was just around the corner, and indeed it was. Almost as soon as the guy took his first drag, the huge wheezing silver and green thing pulled around the block and headed towards them. The man muttered a curse and flicked his butt into the road, while Sapphire and Alex cheered and made faces imitating his disappointment.

It made Alex's day just to slide the bus pass through the slot and see the little light go green. He hardly ever got to "do the honors", as he called it when his mother let him. Usually he had to have exact change. Usually he didn't get to ride the bus at all. His mom and dad had no idea it was practically his favorite experience, though you think they might have guessed, from the maps, the posters, the toy buses he collected, his persistent questions about his father's late brother Charles and his employment, but no. Parents were hopelessly clueless, he decided, Sapphire's dad as well. He had the idea that she had some kind of learning disability, all because she hated sitting still.

That was going to be another problem, Alex foresaw. Getting Sapphire

to sit still long enough, because buses are slow, and take a long time to get anywhere. Their plan that day was to go as far as Westwind, get off, and walk back, making a sort of maze around the major street, covering two full blocks on either side in a loop back pattern. Westwind was only about a twenty minute ride, while Martinsgate would be at least twice that. He'd have to gauge her persistence and maybe modulate his expectations. He smiled at his thought, at the opportunity to use the word "modulate". Alex loved his words.

Sapphire meanwhile was having no problem sitting still, because the scenery was changing every second. As long as things were new and changing, she could hang on in there, which was one of the reasons she had trouble turning off the television. It was as if they'd calculated her attention span right down to the millisecond - and that would be about right. Her new rule was, never turn the damn thing on. So far she'd gone four days with no TV and was extremely proud of herself.

The bus took off, stopped and started, turned some corners, or barreled down a main drag. She wasn't familiar with the route, and within a few minutes they were in a part of the city she had never seen before. It stunned her to realize that. Here she'd grown up practically a mile away and had never seen that corner grocery store, had never seen the funny bright pink Japanese vegetable stand, had never seen the broken clock on the antique lamp post in front of the now-shuttered hardware store, and she wondered what else she had never seen on that street. Someone might have told her about the life-size plastic horse statue that used to sit in front of that very hardware store, had sat there for more than three generations, had been the pride and joy of the family that had handed down the store from father to son until the realities of modern economics had broken it down for good. She would have loved that horse.

Alex had seen it. It was there until only a couple of years before, and as the bus passed he remembered it and thought of telling Sapphire about it, but he could see that she was glued to the window and

wouldn't have appreciated the interruption. He liked to see her like this. She had a half smile that indicated her most benign condition. He would never interrupt a smile like that.

A few minutes later he did have to tap her on the shoulder and tell her they were getting off at the next stop. She turned at him sharply and he thought that maybe she would fight it, but she'd agreed on the plan and simply nodded and pulled the rope to sound the bell. When the bus came squealing to the corner they jumped out of their seats and hopped down the stairs and out the back door.

Snapdragon Alley

Looking to the left and to the right, Sapphire and Alex couldn't make up their minds for a few minutes. There seemed to be no difference to the side streets - each one contained an array of single family homes with picket fences enclosing small front yards. None of them looked like adventure. Alex sighed, thinking maybe just peering down the way would count, and hoping his friend would go along with that, but his expectations were realistically low. She was not going to be deterred and was not ready, yet, to modify the rules.

"How about this one?" she proclaimed, gesturing at a street sign reading 'Poindexter'.

"Might as well", Alex agreed, and down the street they went. No one was on the sidewalks, though you might have expected to see some children playing outdoors. Inside a few of the homes they could see the televisions flickering, but every house was pretty much like the last. Some were pale blue, some beige, an occasional pink or yellow. Some had tiny porches. Most did not. There were about twenty houses to the block, and Alex and Sapphire dutifully wound their way around several of them, from Poindexter to Carter to Haymaker and Sansome, round and round through Glenwood Court and Glenwood Place, making sure to circle around the cul-de-sacs, until finally making their way back to Martinsgate Avenue, a few blocks from where the bus had dropped them off.

Sapphire looked at Alex. Alex looked at Sapphire.

"This is not an adventure", she said, and he sadly nodded in agreement.

"In fact", she continued, "this sucks."

"Yup", said Alex.

"Change of plans?" she asked.

"Got to", Alex admitted. He'd kind of known this wasn't going to work.

"Donuts?" she continued, and since they were standing right in front of Millie's Donuts, they agreed to go in and snag a few while they thought the matter over.

Alex liked the plain old-fashioned. Sapphire, anything with jelly inside. It was typical, Alex thought, as he watched the purple goo spread down her chin. If it's messy enough, she can't resist!

He had pulled the map out of his pocket and was using the blue and yellow highlighters together to mark down the half a dozen streets they'd bored through. It barely added a spot to the overall situation.

"There is no way", Sapphire said, with her face full of crumbs, "that I am going to march down all those stupid streets with nothing and nobody on them. I don't care. What's the point?"

"Because they're there?" Alex suggested.

"I wish they weren't", she pronounced. "New rule. It has to have something on it, okay? Only streets with something on them."

"Something being anything but houses?"

"Or apartments".

"Like a business?"

"Any business at all."

"Even if it's just a psychic?"

"Especially if it's a psychic", Sapphire laughed. "Those we gotta do. If there's a psychic, we're going in, okay?"

"But how do we know for sure?"

"We can just look down 'em. We can be pretty sure, I think. No more dead-ends. No more 'courts' or 'places'. No more streets that curve around a little going nowhere. Let's use a different color to mark them out of bounds."

"Red?"

"Good idea. I'll bet we could just 'red out' a whole bunch of the city right now, just by looking at the squiggly lines".

Alex looked it over and was pretty sure he agreed.

"We can still cover all the neighborhoods", he said, "just not every house".

"And we have to go into every kind of business at least once, okay?"

"Even liquor stores? They'll throw us out."

"Let 'em. We just have to go into one of them one time, and we'll make a list. We'll write down every kind of store we go into and how many times, but we only have to do each kind one time, okay?"

"Okay", Alex nodded. He knew that when it came to rewriting all the rules, there was never any holding her back. She could always come up with more new rules per second than anyone.

"Write down donuts", she ordered, as Alex pulled out the little blue notebook he always carried around.

"We might need index cards", he muttered, as always preparing to organize.

"We could do a whole bunch right now", Sapphire's eyes shone, as she looked out across the street at a whole row of little shops - "shoe repair, pizza, water ... what?" she guffawed, "there's a water store over there across the street. Oh man, we gotta go in there. We'll set a record for the most different kind of stupid", and then she was already out the door heading for the corner before Alex even knew that she'd stood up.

The chase was on. Sapphire was determined to walk in and out of every business on the street, first on one side and then the other, and Alex did his best to keep up and keep notes too. Somehow she'd managed to shift the priorities again. They had started out doing streets, and now they were doing businesses. He never knew how she managed to switch contexts every time, and once she got started, there was no stopping her until she ran out of space or time or both. Fortunately for their feet, she was still following the original plan to head back the way they'd come on the bus, so it was just a matter of walking in and out of every shop on Martinsgate Avenue for the entire two miles. Alex was dutiful, but dragging by the end of it.

Later, when he was glad to be home and resting on his bunk bed, he looked over his wall of maps again. He still had dreams of achieving his original plan, but with Sapphire it might not be possible. He couldn't even keep her on the same track for even a whole day.

"I should have known better", he said to himself. "It was never going to happen".

His eyes followed once again the line of the 63 Venezia, how it cut across the city in a diagonal zigzag from the southwest to the northeast, how it stayed the same from year to year to year, when all the other routes seemed to get adjusted and re-arranged. He decided

he would take that bus, alone if he had to, all the way from end to the other and back.

While he was dreaming of the 63, he didn't see his little brother come into the room and climb halfway up the bunk bed ladder. He didn't notice until Argus suddenly announced,

"How come that one street disappeared?"

Alex sat up and looked at where his brother was pointing on the artist map - way up in the farthest northeast corner of the city, where the 63 Venezia came to an end, and Alex saw it, and saw it for the first time, although he must have looked at that map for a million hours, that the 63 had indeed changed, once, and only once, during that one year of the artist map. It went one block further than it ever did before or after. That one block was a very small street which seemed to come to a sudden end just shy of the city line, and the map had the street's name spelled out in the tiniest of print. Alex had to grab a magnifying glass and press his face up against the wall to make out the words, 'Snapdragon Alley'.

He looked down at Argus, who was still perched halfway up the ladder.

"I don't know", Alex said. "But I'm sure going to find out".

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