

Chasing Windmills

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Published by Black Swan,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

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This is the part that's going to be hard to explain: How can I tell you why two people who were afraid of everything—other people, open places, noise, confusion, life itself—wound up riding the subways alone under Manhattan late at night?

Okay, it's like this: When everything is unfamiliar and scary, your heart pounds just getting change from the grocery cashier. That feels like enough to kill you right there. So the danger of the subways at night can't be much worse. All danger begins to fall into the same category. You have no way to sink any deeper into fear.

Besides, consider the alternative. Staying home.

That's enough about that for now. I need to tell you about her.

She got on the Lexington Avenue local at . . . what was it? . . . I think Union Square. Funny how a thing like

that can be so damned important, but you don't know it's important until an instant later in the big scheme of time. Then you go back and try to retrieve it. You tell yourself it's in there somewhere. But it's really in that no-man's-land of the moment before you woke up and started paying attention to your own life.

I'm pretty sure it was Union Square.

At first we looked at each other for a split second, but of course we looked away immediately. It's part of what makes us like the animals, I suppose. Ever seen two dogs circling to fight? They look right into each other's eyes. It's a challenge. So when a dog doesn't want to challenge anybody, he looks away. In case I haven't made it clear by now, we were two dogs who weren't looking for a fight.

But then, after we both looked away, we weren't afraid of each other anymore. We knew we didn't have to be. I mean, except to the extent that we were afraid of everything.

There was no one else in the car. It rumbled along again, with that special rocking, and the clacking noise, the lights flashing off now and then. And the heat. It was only May, but the heat had started early. It was after midnight, so I guess you'd think it was all cooled off by then, but it wasn't. A little bit cooler up on the street. Not so much down there. It was stuffy, like more air would be nice.

Every now and then we'd hear a noise that could

have been somebody opening the door from another car. And we'd jump in unison, and look up. But it was never anybody. Just the two of us all the way to the end of the line.

Once I looked over at her while she was looking away. Her hair was dark and thick and about down to her shoulders. Her face was thin, like the rest of her. I couldn't figure out if there was something angular about her face, or something almost delicate. Maybe both.

I was trying to get a bead on how old she was. Older than me, that's for sure. I mean, she was a full-grown woman. But young enough, I guess. But maybe old compared to me. Early twenties.

Every inch of her was covered. Except her face. Jeans, boots, some kind of shawl thing wrapped around her. Seemed like too much to wear in that heat.

And a hat. She was wearing a hat over all that dark hair. A gray felt thing with a big brim. So all she had to do was dip her head an inch or two, and she was gone again. She could break off eye contact just like that. It seemed like such a great plan. I wondered why I'd never thought of it myself.

And on one cheek, a dark spot. Not exactly a bruise, but something like one. Like a shadow. Like she'd had some sort of an accident.

I think I remember feeling that it was a lovely face, but maybe I'm adding that in after the fact. It's hard to

go back and describe what you thought of such an important face the first time you saw it. The memory gets colored with all those other things you felt later on. It's hard to separate them out again. But whatever I thought about her face, I noticed it. And it held me.

Then she looked up and I quick looked away.

At the end of the line, we both waited. And neither one of us got off the train.

You see, it says a lot about someone when they don't get off at the end of the line. When they just sit there with the doors open until the train starts back the other way. Right back to—or past—where they started out in the first place. That says a lot.

After the train started back up again, she looked right into my eyes. She didn't look away and neither did I.

Something happened in me. I'm not sure how good I'll be at explaining what it was. But it was an actual physical something. Something in my body. And I'm not going to go into any personal information about certain body reactions, because some things I'm just not comfortable discussing. Some things a gentleman doesn't talk about. Or, anyway, that's what I believe. But something happened in my gut. Like all of a sudden something that used to be solid in there turned to water. Hot water. In my arms, too, around my elbows. And a little bit down my legs. Especially around my knees. I remembered hearing an expression about being weak in the knees, and I guess I understood it for the first time.

And there was a tingling associated with all this. A kind of all-over tingling, but mostly in my face. Which felt a little hot, like it might be turning red.

Then it was too much and we both looked away again. But not the same way we had before.

We rode like that for another hour or so, and never looked at each other after that. I wanted to look, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Then I woke up—which was weird, because I'd never felt myself go to sleep—and I was on that subway car by myself, and she was gone. I looked at my watch, and it was after three.

All I could think was that I wanted to talk to Delilah about this. About what had just happened. But, what had just happened? What was I supposed to say? There was this woman on the subway, and she looked at me. But in the few weeks I'd been talking to Delilah, every time I told her something I'd been feeling, she seemed to know what that feeling was. It made me seem almost . . . normal.

WHEN I GOT HOME, the apartment was dark and quiet, and of course my father was asleep. I came in on my tip-toes, even though it's pretty hard to wake him after he's taken his sleeping pill. You'd almost have to be trying. But I was careful all the same.

I looked at myself in my bathroom mirror. I wanted

to look at myself the way someone else would look at me. I wanted to see what she saw.

I discovered something strange about myself in that moment. The moment I caught my own eyes in the mirror, I looked away. It was hard to force myself to look at myself. I wasn't bad to look at. It wasn't that. I wasn't the handsomest guy in the world, but I wasn't ugly. I guess I thought I looked fine. But it was almost as though I'd never really looked into my own eyes before. Like it was as hard to look at myself as it was to look at somebody else. And I wasn't sure what that meant. Unless it meant I was the kind of dog who didn't even want to challenge myself.

IN THE MORNING, I came to the breakfast table, and my father was staring at me. Taking my emotional temperature, as I like to put it. He only looked away once, to glance at his watch. That was his way of telling me I'd slept too long. If he only knew.

Then he went back to scrutinizing me again.

I hate that. It makes me feel like I guess a worm must feel when some fisherman is about to stick him on a hook. Like you want to get away, but there's no way to get away, so you just squirm. It's no use, but you do it anyway.

He said, "Good morning, Sebastian."

I said, "Good morning, Father."

I know how weird that sounds, but that's what I have to call him. He's not into any of that "Dad" or "Pop" stuff. I'm Sebastian, all three syllables every time, and he's Father. And that's not negotiable. That is one of any number of things that are not negotiable.

He was wearing his glasses at the table, his weird little round, wire-rimmed glasses. All the better to stare at me, I suppose. And some of his hair was spilling down over his forehead. His hair was curly and a little unruly, like mine, but gray. Suddenly, it seemed. Almost as if every morning you could see how much grayer it was than the day before.

And he was still studying me. It was as if he could see that something had changed in me. It was horrifying.

"What?" I said, finally, when I couldn't take it anymore.

"You seem different."

"I don't feel different," I said. Lying.

"You seem different."

"Different how?"

"I'm not sure. Like you were happy or excited about something."

Ah, yes. That. The sin of being happy or excited. According to my father, we must guard carefully against such things. According to my father, these emotions are the equivalent of dancing on our fifth-floor window ledge. Clearly inviting a nasty fall.

"Well, I'm not," I said. Hoping that would be the end of it.

It wasn't.

"I think you're taking too much sleep," he said.

"Sleep is good for you. You can tell because I've been so healthy. Think how long it's been since I've been sick. It's the running, if you ask me, and plenty of sleep."

"There's still such a thing as too much."

I shifted tactics in midstream. "I was up late last night. I couldn't sleep. Didn't get to sleep until after three. That's why I slept in."

At first he said nothing. But I could tell by his mood that he wasn't done. You could feel it shifting around in him. You can always tell when he's mixing up another batch of something. But for a while he just stirred his bowl of cereal with a spoon. I remember thinking it must be getting really soggy.

Then he said, "What do you do? When you can't sleep?"

"I don't know. Just lie there."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Think, I guess."

"What do you think about?"

I wanted to jump into that. I always want to jump him when he does that. It makes me want to attack. Not physically; I'm not like that. Attack verbally, the way he does with me. It makes me

crazy when he tries to get inside my head. The only place I have left. But it never helps to rise up against him like that. It just never does any good.

"I don't remember," I said.

The face of the woman on the subway came into my head, fully formed, perfect. A perfect recollection. I wondered if I would ever see her again. I couldn't have imagined at that moment that I would.

I FINISHED MY LESSONS by one p.m. and went out for my run. My father frowned, the way he always did when I left the apartment to run. But he said nothing anymore. This point, at least, I had permanently won.

The whole time I was running, mostly in the park, I thought, *Please let Delilah be there today. Please.* It was like a chant that kept me going.

As I turned the final corner, I looked up at our building and there she was. Three floors up, hanging half out her window, waving at me. I smiled without even meaning to. Out loud but quietly, I said, "Thank you," and then realized I didn't even know who I was talking to.

I waited by the outside door, panting, for a few minutes, and then she hobbled down, and I held the door for her. She said what she always said.

"Thank you, child."

It's hard for her to get through the door without

help. She has a bad hip, or maybe it's both of them, and she's very big, and walks with a cane. So getting through the door is hard unless somebody else holds it. Something about her hips or her back pushes the top of her body forward, so she looks like some kind of punctuation mark, though I'm not sure which one. Maybe a question mark that doesn't really curve around all the way on top. And she walks with her huge back end kind of trailing in a noticeable way. But I'm not criticizing. She's the best friend I have. She's the best friend I've ever had. Maybe it seems weird we could be friends when she's over fifty and I'm under eighteen. But we manage just fine.

We started off on our walk together. I had to remember to walk about twelve times slower than I would on my own.

Delilah took her little portable fan out of her pocket. A little plastic rocket of a fan, bright blue, with little blades like a miniature helicopter. She had to turn it on with her left hand, because she needed to lean on the cane with her right. The blades opened up like a flower and I could hear the buzz as they started to spin, and she trained the breeze onto her face and sighed.

"This weather, child," she said. "Good Lord, this heat."

She had a wonderful face, Delilah. Light-skinned black with freckles on her cheeks, and eyes the color of

walnut shells, and the biggest teeth you ever saw in your life, so that when she smiled it seemed to take up her whole face. It was fun to make her smile, just to see it again. And it wasn't hard, either. Lots of things made Delilah smile.

"So," she said. "Where does that father of yours think you are right now?"

I looked down at the sidewalk and didn't answer.

"So you still haven't seen fit to tell him you made a friend."

"You don't know how he is," I said. "You don't know him."

"Not sure I got a yen to. Not sure what I think of a man doesn't want his own boy to have a single friend."

I looked up from the sidewalk and gave her a pleading look. Like, *Please. Not now. Not again.* And she caught it, and nodded, and waved it away with the hand that held the little plastic fan.

"Okay, okay, never you mind," she said.

Imagine such a thing. Being able to tell somebody what you want with your eyes. And get it. See why I loved Delilah so much? Even though I'd only known her for a few weeks.

"Something happened last night," I said.

"'Bout time," she said.

"I'm afraid it'll sound silly. Like it was nothing."

"If it's something to you, then it's something to me."

So I told her about the woman on the subway, and

the way she looked at me, and the way it made me feel inside. She listened with a little closed-mouth smile getting wider and wider on her face. Not like she was making fun of me, though. More like she knew what I was talking about even if I didn't.

When she was sure I was done she said, "Ooooooh-weeee."

"Meaning what?"

"Your first dose of electricity."

"What does that mean?"

It's not that I didn't know what it meant, exactly. I'm not a complete idiot. I meant . . . what did I mean? I meant, why *that* woman? And why not ever before? At least, not quite like that ever before.

"Means you're a boy. And you're not dead yet. And you're not a little child no more."

But those were the parts I already knew.

We walked without talking for a couple of minutes. But it was still okay.

Then her fan slowed down. I could hear the sound of the blades change, and get low and sluggish. She rapped it hard on the top of her cane, and it seemed to pick up again. But a minute later, it slowed even more.

She stopped walking, so I stopped, too. She looked down at the fan like she was looking under the hood of a broken-down car. Like she would see the problem and know how to fix it.

"Bat-tries are dead. I wore the darn bat-tries down. Can't believe I didn't charge the darn bat-tries." She turned it off, sighed a very different kind of sigh from when she'd turned it on, and slipped it into the pocket of her enormous linen pants.

"I didn't even know her," I said. "I'd never even seen her before."

"That won't matter," she said. "Chemistry won't care. Two people either have it or they don't. Have it first time they set eyes on each other. Across a crowded room. Like the song says."

I didn't know what song, but I didn't ask.

A minute later, we passed by one of those stores that sell cheap souvenirs to the tourists. Electronics and postcards and little plastic Statues of Liberty. And in the window I saw they had fans. The old-fashioned, low-tech kind. The kind that fold up into a little stick, but unfolded they look like an accordion and have Chinese or Japanese art on them.

"Wait here," I said.

She looked like she could use a minute to rest, anyway. I ran inside to buy one for Delilah. Yes, ran inside. Risked the horrors of people I'd never even met. Walked right through the heart pounding. All for my friend.

It only cost me \$1.99, about ten percent of my weekly allowance, but from the look in her eyes you'd have thought I bought her a new car or a mink coat. She unfolded it and hid the bottom half of her face behind

it, pretend coy like a Japanese geisha girl. Then she lowered it and laughed so loud I bet they could hear her inside the store.

“Child, if you aren’t just the sweetest thing,” she said, when she was all through laughing. And she put her hand on the top of my head and brought it down to her level and kissed me right on the forehead.

Then we walked on, and she fanned herself with her left hand and seemed to feel better.

“Congratulations,” she said.

“For what?”

“For being alive. Hope something like last night happens to you again real soon.”