

She's with Bobby

As Alain passed the park, rag man was slouching in one of the playground's swings, his right leg kicking at the January ground and causing the swing's chains to grind and twist from one side to the next.

“Bobby was *the* all American kid. He made Uncle Disney millions,” rag man said. “Then Bobby grew up.”

For a reason he couldn't understand, Alain stopped rather than rushing across the street to his apartment building. He surveyed the park that he could normally watch from his studio's window on the third floor, connecting the details that had always lay before him into a summary judgment for the first time: the grassy curves and hills that prevented any ball games or chasing, the bridge with a corrugated metal tunnel beneath that was the perfect hiding place for predators, the scraggly trees and bushes, diseased from lack of care. The park was a disaster; whoever designed it was an idiot. Rag man belonged there.



“Give me five dollars,” rag man said. His voice carried over the distance between swing set and sidewalk well, too well for Alain to pretend he hadn’t heard.

“I don’t have any change.”

“Five dollars isn’t change.”

“Then how about ‘no.’”

Alain crossed to his apartment. On the sidewalk before the building’s entrance, the fallen leaves from the previous October were now just rusted stains. An icy mist fluttered down from the darkening sky.

That unrelenting mist was already coalescing into drops that seeped into his studio’s large window frame and would soon drip into one of the three yogurt containers he had set out to collect the intruding water. His answering machine flashed. He listened to the message. It wasn’t the woman he had met at the copy shop last week, nor was it the woman who worked at the bookstore and had taken his number with palpable reluctance. It was his dad. Drunk, again.

“There’s no trusting them, son. They’re gone long before they ever leave. That’s the trick they play on you. You’ve already lost them before they even reach the door.”

Sounded like another scotch night.

Alain hated the weekends, and this was only Friday evening. In the years since Monique left him to attend law school back east, he hadn’t found his rhythm with the women of this rain-soaked town. The work week was a blessed escape from the studio apartment, the internet, the TV, all of which made him restless and isolated. At least at work, people talked to him, laughed at his jokes, made him feel part of something. At



home, alone, he felt like an outsider to his own isolation, and only a world of the most fucked up order, he thought, could create such a feeling.

He flicked on the TV and zipped through the channels. CNN was running a grainy video of a kidnapped journalist in Iraq, the first abducted American woman. She was lovely. On the video, and despite her terrible circumstances, she was poised. Tired but poised. He turned up the sound, but the CNN reporter cut in to say that the journalist's words were blocked by the Al Jazeera newscasters.

He learned that the kidnapped journalist was his age. She had traveled first to Jordan, and then Iraq, where she subsisted as a freelance writer. Inside the war zone, she wore a burqa so she could pass unnoticed among the Iraqis, and she refused to travel to interviews in an armored car. In one of her pieces—an academic article for her fellow journalists—she had written that her fate was in Iraq. The CNN reporter saved that bit of information for the last, almost trusting the viewers to connect the dots of irony before bursting in with the observation that the journalist had gotten her wish.

Alain flicked around the other stations for more on the story but couldn't find anything more.

He picked up the phone, but thought better of returning his dad's call, and returned the phone to the charger. He ignored the sink filled with crusted dishes that he had been promising himself he'd get to, and he left his apartment again.

When he reached the park, night had fallen and the mist had traded up to rain. He was just tucking his head inside his hood when a woman approached. They met within a circle of streetlight cast from the several poles that surrounded the playground, and he



only noticed the cardboard sign with its Sharpie-scrawled request for help after she started talking,

“Do you have any food or change?”

He patted his pockets before he was even aware he was doing it, and he abandoned his strict policy against giving panhandlers money. This woman, who was maybe in her early twenties, wasn't faking being hungry or cold. Alain also couldn't deny she was pretty.

“You're a lot nicer than other people have been today,” she said. Her voice was cracked with hurt, as if there were other lands where folks freely gave money to panhandlers along with a warm blessing.

He scooped out the coins from his coat pocket and passed them to her.

“Take care of yourself,” he said. Perhaps he had been moved by her sadness, but he really did want her to be OK.

“Have a good day,” she said.

He continued walking.

“You, too,” he said.

He thought about her on his way to the bus stop. Something had passed between them. Not the money, but the concern -- his concern. He wished he had given her more cash, or taken her to get food at one of the nearby cafes.

The bus arrived, hissing as it settled beside the curb, but he turned away and returned to the park. She wasn't there. No one was. There were no vagrants, no street kids, and that was rare. He circled the park and then wandered the neighboring streets. She wasn't anywhere. God, he had given her less than a dollar, and besides the guilt there



was the growing dread of a missed opportunity. An opportunity for exactly what, he couldn't have said, but he connected with other people so rarely any more, and women even less so, it hardly mattered that she was a panhandler.

He returned to the park. Rag man was there with the shopping cart he used to truck his possessions around town.

Alain stayed at the edge of the grass and said,

“You haven't seen a woman here? A woman with a sign?”

The other man stopped rummaging through his cart long enough to say,

“How about ‘no.’”

Alain reached for his wallet and marched into the park.

“Look, I'm sorry about earlier. Here.”

Rag man straightened. His eyes were olive colored, the pupils tiny. The rest of his face was covered with a patchy beard. He made a show of pinching his fingers together and tweezing the bills from Alain's hand.

“Beneath the bridge,” rag man said. “With Bobby.”

At first Alain thought the vagrant was referring to the many bridges in town that spanned the river. Junkies shot up there. The homeless slept there. He didn't want to have to search under those spans in order to find her, but he would. He needed to see her again.

“Which one?”

Rag man thumbed toward the small walk-bridge inside the park. Then he adjusted the tarp covering his cart and pushed away.

Alain squatted to peer into the corrugated metal tunnel, but he couldn't view anything within the darkened area from his vantage point. He navigated the grassy incline



toward it. The sulphur-spice aroma of feces made his eyes water and forced him to breathe through his mouth.

There was only darkness, and no gray light on the other side. Within the tunnel something shifted its weight, reverberating a bass drum beat echo along the metal.

“Hello?” Alain said. “Are you OK?”

No response. Whoever was hiding had stopped moving, stopped breathing, as if fearing discovery.

Alain grew more uncomfortable by the moment, but he thought he’d try once more,

“We met earlier. I gave you some change.”

He should have kept his mouth shut; that sounded so lame.

The silence continued. He squatted lower, but there was only a flat, one dimensional darkness.

Alain straightened and made his way up the slope. He muddied his shoes and pants legs, and nearly fell backward. Rain cascaded the air. He was about to leave the park for his apartment when he saw her.

She was huddled at the base of a streetlight. Her sign, curling from moisture, leaned against her knees: *Stranded, Need Food or Change*.

“Hey,” he said.

She blinked up at him with no recognition, but plenty of caution,

“Yeah?”

“Can I get you some food?”



“Sure,” she said and brightened. Still, he was disappointed that she hadn’t remembered their interaction from earlier. He almost reminded her of the coins he had given her, but then caught himself. Instead, he recommended a café a couple of blocks away.

“I shouldn’t leave the park,” she said.

He knew that women in the city rarely panhandled alone, and if they did, they usually returned to a man or a group for the night. Alain’s generosity surprised even him when he said,

“I can get food for the others, too.”

An unreadable expression crossed her face, and she turned back toward the park. Was it fear? Shame? He couldn’t know. He did know that she was more than pretty, and she shouldn’t have been in the park.

“I can’t leave,” she said.

His image of them sitting for dinner together faded. He wanted to help her, to show her what a giving gentleman he was. She could trust him. Why wasn’t she cooperating?

“Tell me what you want,” he said.

She gazed out at the neighborhood of brick apartment buildings and large bungalow homes that surrounded the park. The rain ceased, and the January chill deepened.

“I am hungry,” she said, fingering her cardboard sign.

He offered to buy her anything she wished from the café. At first she requested only a salad and some bread, because she was a vegetarian, a vegan actually, but



maintaining such a diet while living on the streets was impossible. He listed some of the other menu options he could recall, like the vegetarian lasagna, that would better satisfy her hunger, and by the end of it, he'd talked her not only into the lasagna, but a soy burger, as well.

“Don't go anywhere,” he said as he left.

“It's the park,” she said. “I'll be here.”

He hustled to the café and tried to quash his irritation that it was full—no one else wanted to cook on a Friday night either—and that his take-out order would require twenty minutes or more to prepare. While he waited, he plotted ways to maneuver the woman out of the park. Could he offer for her to stay with him? What of the male, this Bobby, who was undoubtedly connected to her and probably panhandling in some other part of town? Was Alain prepared to take care of this guy as well? No, of course he wasn't.

By the time he got his food, he'd decided that he would start by simply asking her what her story was. How had she ended up on the streets? Contrary to whatever other motives he might have had, he was curious about her history.

He shouldn't have been surprised when she was no longer beneath the streetlight, nor anywhere else in the park, when he returned with the food. In that first moment, when he realized the playground was empty, a familiar dread and loneliness blanketed him, just as it had done when Monique left. How could she disappear? Why was he always so easy to leave?



He circled the grass and play structure several times; hell, he even considered taking another peek beneath the walk-bridge again, but then anger overtook every other emotion. He tossed the bag of food into the park and retreated to his apartment.

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Alain avoided the park for days afterward, even walking blocks out of his way if need be. He still had to cross within view of the grass knoll and play-structure every time he entered his apartment building, but he kept his eyes on the sidewalk, on those stains of October leaves, rather than notice if the woman and her sign were there.

Work carried the meaning of his days, and he checked his email and his home phone messages in compulsive waves, as if the woman in the park might conjure some other means to reach him. There was nothing. Nothing from anyone. Even his father had shifted the audience of his drunken tirades to Alain's sister. He felt cut off, alone.

One night, CNN aired new video footage of the kidnapped journalist. He had almost forgotten, but the deadline for extinguishing her life had come and gone, and according to the time-stamp on the screen, she had survived. For now. The video's poor quality reminded him of film shot during the first Gulf War using night-vision technology -- everything tinged with green, gray and black. Adorned in a khemar, the journalist was no longer poised. She was weeping. Her shoulders rose and fell like a fearful child as, per her captors' demands, she pleaded to the camera to release US-held Iraqi female hostages so that she could live. Her face creased and bowed on her words, and her body quaked. It was as if someone had punched him in the solar plexus. He wanted to find her, to protect her, and to make her kidnappers suffer. She was abandoned in a foreign land, left to die so far from home. He believed he understood what that felt like.



Alain listened to CNN's commentary, and then, dissatisfied with what was revealed there, he sought out more information on-line. There was very little, although he was able to find the video of her pleading and weeping that had just broadcast. He watched it several more times, and his horror increased with each viewing. The night vision's green hue transformed the journalist's eyes into unearthly orbs of shiny darkness, and he couldn't shake the sense of undertow, couldn't shake the sense that he was watching a woman who was already dead. What she must have endured in her weeks of captivity. She was so far from home, from safety. He knew from previous kidnappings of soldiers, contractors and journalists since the Iraq War began that two TV appearances were usually all the hostages got -- one with the demands, the other with the beheading. The fact that the female journalist had survived the second date encouraged him, but the sense of urgency in the second video also frightened him.

After work the next evening, the woman with the cardboard sign was sitting beneath the same streetlight on the border of the park where he had encountered her before. Alain tried not to care that she was back, but the anger, and the relief, proved too strong.

"You're getting soaked," he said to her.

She gazed up at him, this time with a hint of recognition, or so he hoped. The rain had flattened her unwashed hair and had moistened her skin, and he realized what a lovely porcelain tone her face held. Who had she been in her previous life?

"Come to my place and get warm," he said, crossing lines he had been prepared to cross for days.

She lowered her head, stared into her hands.



“You’ll get sick if you stay out in this weather. Taking care of yourself is the most important thing.”

“There are other things,” she said to her lap.

He surveyed the park. The streetlights weren’t strong enough to reveal the grass hills, the play structure, and the bridge he knew to be there. Only their shadows. Was it his imagination or had someone emerged from the tunnel?

“Who is that?” He asked.

She grabbed the sleeve of his coat.

“Let’s go,” she said.

His hand shook as he keyed in the building’s security code. He let her walk ahead of him, treated this as if it were a date. She didn’t say a word until they were inside his apartment. Once he had closed the door, she dropped her cardboard sign on his futon, and said,

“I should shower first.”

He pointed her to the bathroom, to his extra towels. She didn’t close the door while she undressed, and he watched her naked flank before turning and busying himself in the kitchen. He didn’t have much in the way of food, but he could make a meal from the vegetables he had. She was a vegan, right?

As she showered, the windows collected the moisture, and his studio turned humid. Finally, she shut off the water, and in a few moments, she appeared with only the towel wrapped around her. Her cleansed hair cast wet curls to her shoulders.

“I’d like to eat.”



He set out snacks for her, just some hummus and crackers to start, and went to work finishing the vegetables. She didn't immediately devour the snacks, as he thought she might. She dipped a cracker, took a bite, and then set the cracker down.

He tried not to think of her skin or that she was sitting at his table in only a towel. Or that she seemed more interested in studying him than in satisfying what must have been a ravishing hunger.

"So, what brought you here," he said, hoping it didn't sound rehearsed. He didn't want to use words like 'street' or 'homeless.' He wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt; he wanted her to know that he didn't consider her a wastrel or a drug-addict. She had simply made a wrong decision at some critical juncture in her life. Those things happened.

"You wanted me here," she said.

"I meant the city. And, you know, the park."

She took a fresh cracker and dipped it in the hummus rather than return to her half-eaten one. She ate the whole cracker this time.

"I'd almost forgotten what food tasted like," she said. She dipped another cracker and chewed.

He tried again, "What's your story?"

"Same as everyone else's," she said. "Same as yours."

The broccoli, carrots and green beans were done. He arranged the vegetables on a plate in a semi-presentable fashion and placed the food before her.



Alain was about to say more, but she attacked the vegetables, barely taking time to breathe between bites. He let her eat in peace while he cleaned up the small mess he'd made in the kitchen.

When she was done, she asked for alcohol. He had only beer, and she accepted the bottle he offered.

She asked him his name. He told her, and then asked hers. He asked her to repeat her name because it sounded foreign and was not easy to remember. The second time didn't help, either. The name skated right out of his mind.

Then she said, "Come here," and he forgot about her name.

It had been months since he'd been with a woman, and her directness startled him. Up until that moment, he had been telling himself that he hadn't brought her there for anything more than food and comfort. He only wanted her to be safe. Safe with him. But when she tugged at his belt, unzipped his fly, and went to work, he forgot every platitude.

When she was done, she moved to her pile of damp clothes. She dropped the towel, bent slowly for her jeans.

He was on her before he could think. She pushed against him, gripped his thigh. Told him over her shoulder,

"Getting more will cost you more."

He agreed to whatever she demanded. They went at it most of the night, dozing between sessions. He quit using condoms, and both the danger and the exquisite sensation made it even better. For whole hours he forgot who he was, or what he was, and he lived purely through his flesh and through hers.



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Alain was in the park, huddled beside the swing set. Somehow he'd dressed in jeans and a fleece but forgotten his shoes. His socks and pants were soaked, muddied. Across the road and yet far away was his apartment building. He wondered if she was still in his bed.

Then, the shopping cart rattled nearby. Alain scanned in all directions, but he couldn't locate rag man or his cart.

The grinding of the cart's wheels on concrete stopped. A moment later, Alain heard the tromping of feet upon the grass near him.

Rag man said, "Bobby knows we all gave up on him. He knows we're the ones to blame. Uncle Walt was only making a sound business decision."

Alain wasn't listening. He was more concerned about exiting the park and getting back to the woman in his apartment. He strode for the sidewalk, but as he did so, his knees weakened, and his equilibrium shifted toward the darkness beneath the bridge and inside the corrugated, metal tunnel.

"Bobby grew up, got acne, lost his elfin voice. Uncle Walt and the studio cut him loose. That's when Bobby and the needle found each other."

This time a panicked Alain trotted for the edge of the park, but his orientation shifted, again, and he only drew closer to the tunnel.

"Kids playing in an abandoned building found Bobby's body. He'd been dead for weeks. Just another anonymous junkie corpse until his folks eventually ID'd him. He's still buried in a pauper's grave in New York. Far from home."



Now, even if Alain tried not to move, the bridge and the tunnel drew closer.

Rag man said, “Bobby lingers in the low places, finds the abandoned ones, the ones with stories like his. He wants you to know that there is no hope. Only beginnings are happy. Endings never are. Bobby is going to show you.”

Alain tumbled down the incline, but instead of contacting the wet grass and errant stones, he rolled into a metal grid, which he mistook for the shopping cart. It wasn't the shopping cart; it was a cage – no, a dog kennel. He kicked against the seemingly thin bars, shoved his back against those at the top, but the cage held.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light cast from above by the orange bar of an almost extinguished fluorescent bulb, he made out two other occupied kennels nearby. The poor lighting prevented him from identifying who was inside. One of the occupants prayed in a language Alain couldn't identify. The other was silent.

“Where is this?” Alain asked. “What's happening?”

The praying continued without missing a beat.

“What the fuck is going on?” He asked.

“One of us dies tonight,” a woman's voice said. “They don't think I can understand them, but I've studied the language. I know.”

The praying in the third cage grew louder, as if the man inside hoped to overwrite reality with volume alone.

Alain's thoughts sputtered against his mouth.

“Who are they? Why are they doing this?”

The woman, only a hunched shadow, made an impatient ‘Tch’ sound.



“The video will be online by daybreak. The press will get wind of it by mid-day, but won’t bother airing it. There have already been so many executions. What’s one more?”

Alain threw himself against the cage. It held.

Footfalls pounded on the level above. Then voices, which were cheery, boisterous, and in the language that resembled the praying man’s.

“How long have you been here?” He asked her.

Her voice cracked as she said,

“Lifetimes.”

A clamor of footfalls cascaded down the cellar stairs, and a swarm of men invaded the space. Alain didn’t know they had guns until the leaden stocks cracked against the cages, taunting each of the prisoners.

“Me!” The woman said. “Please.” Then she—he guessed—repeated her plea in the language of their captors.

But it was Alain’s cage that opened. Hands tore at him, and no matter how hard he kicked, the multitude overpowered him and dragged him forward. Once pulled from the cage, a barrage of rifle butts cracked into his chest and face, knocking the struggle out of him.

They hauled him upstairs and pushed him to his knees before a sole video camera, which was duct-taped to a tripod. Behind him was a black banner devoid of writing or symbols. The rest of the room around him was mundane: A worn beige sofa, an oak coffee table with a cracked glass top, the day’s newspaper tossed onto the tan carpet.



The men cinched Alain's hands behind his back with what felt like stereo speaker wire. They stood behind him, held him in place. Then, one man broke from the group and spread clear plastic out before Alain. This was the first time Alain could see one of his captors. The man wore a blue business suit, a green felt cap with a red feather sticking from it, and his face was slathered over in a thick, white ointment that reminded Alain of the zinc oxide sun-block he had used as a kid.

The man with the caked white face hit play on the camera and examined the shot through the camera's small screen. Then he gave Alain a wink and returned to his place with the group.

Alain focused on the clear plastic that lay before him on the floor. The plastic was a detail he'd never seen in the videos of other executions. His eyes found the newspaper again, and it occurred to him that he'd never see another one.

One of the men behind him spoke to the camera in that same language he had heard earlier in the basement. Alain could tell by the man's tone that he was reading. The man stopped. They leaned Alain forward over the clear plastic, and Alain lifted his head, begged the camera for mercy, and waited for the blade. He didn't have to wait long.

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She awoke alone in the morning. She pulled Alain's robe over her sore body and made coffee for herself. She clicked on the TV and opened a window to let in the frigid January air. She'd lived on the street long enough to feel stifled by the dry dustiness of forced-air heating, and once the outside's bracing chill set upon her, she was liberated.



One of Alain's yogurt containers tipped over and spilled rain water onto the fir flooring. She didn't bother wiping it up.

CNN was running a still photograph of the kidnapped journalist. The journalist's father was giving an interview. The journalist had inherited her father's eyes and nose. The father spoke as if addressing the journalist's kidnappers, reminding them that she had a family who loved her, just as she in turn loved the Iraqi people. If he feared for her life, the father didn't give away his emotions.

She turned her back on the TV and sipped her coffee at the window. Below, rag man and his cart circled the park. She would have to return, she knew. There was no hiding. Not from Bobby.

Although she could see them from her place at the window, she didn't notice the rusty stains on the sidewalk where October leaves had fallen and bled out their colors months before.

