

1

I took a seat next to Colleen in the café—on the right side of the table, as I always had. She smiled at me, I smiled back at her, and she began talking about her day. She told me about the client who had canceled on her, the old friend whom she had seen in the park, and her ever-so-slow train ride home. I was listening, but for a brief moment, I looked up.

Normally, I had done this only to refresh my focus on Colleen. We had gone on a large number of dates where we were in our own little world—where a person we knew would walk past us and we wouldn't even know until they told us later that they had seen us. But this day was a bit different; I was on edge. For a moment, I had entirely lost my focus on her. And what I had seen astounded me.

When I looked up, I saw at least ten of my friends—enough to almost fill the tiny café. It was almost like a surprise party, but I wasn't the least bit surprised. I had seen many of my friends randomly throughout the day—even some of the same ones multiple times. Three tables in front of me sat Matt, whom I had seen both at Walgreen's and at the pizzeria across from my office building. But that wasn't the only reason I had lost focus on Colleen.

To the side of my table stood my friend Hakim. There was something quite strange about Hakim this particular evening. Normally, Hakim was a very sociable person, but this evening, he simply fixed his eyes on mine and remained standing without saying a word. It was almost as if

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he were passively waiting for me to give him my attention.

I eventually couldn't help but to look up at him, and when I looked up, he began speaking. The words coming out of his mouth baffled me even more than his quite out-of-place demeanor. He said, "Hey Anton. What are you up to this evening?" I was stunned. Not only had I told him earlier in the day that I would be going on a date—he was also standing right next to me. Nearly lost for words, I simply replied, "Well like I said before, I'm on a date." After I had said this, he stood there for another moment or two, still staring and still silent, and then he simply walked away.

It took me a while to push this anomaly away from my thoughts, but I eventually focused on Colleen again. Hakim's interruption had caused me to forget what she had said about her day, but not wanting to appear as if I had forgotten what she had said, I simply said, "Well it sounds like you had quite an eventful day," but didn't make reference to anything specific which had happened.

She nodded, and went on: "How was your day?"

"Well, my dear—my day was pretty interesting too. We had a pretty busy day at the office. The company just hired a bunch of new people, so we've been entering all sorts of forms—tax forms, contracts, ugh. I got most of them done before I left, but my boss was walking around like a chicken with his head chopped off. Somewhere in the down time, though, I happened to come across an article that I think you might like. It was about a fireman who had..."

Shit! What was going on?—I had thought. I looked up again, and I realized that the café wasn't only filled with

my friends. It was filled with Colleen's friends as well. As soon as I began talking about the article, her friend Claire was approaching our table. Just like Hakim, Claire simply stood there and did not say a word. I stopped talking for a brief moment, and Colleen looked up. As soon as she looked up, Claire had begun speaking, just as Hakim had done a moment earlier. She said something to Colleen, but I couldn't make out what it was because the café was too loud. I heard Colleen mutter, "Tim," to herself—who I had known to have been Claire's boyfriend. I saw Colleen respond to Claire, but again, without her facing me, I was unable to make out the words.

After about a minute, just like Hakim, Claire had walked off as well. At that point, Colleen looked back at me and said, "So what forms did you say you were doing today?"

"Well just a few tax forms and new hire forms. It wasn't really anything out of the ordinary, but we had a lot of them today." I knew that there was something I had wanted to show her, but I couldn't remember what it was. I stared at her blankly for a moment, she smiled, and then I smiled back at her. Internally, I was searching my memory frantically for whatever it was that I had wanted to show her, but I had imagined that she simply thought my focus had been drained from a long day at work. She grabbed my hand, which was sitting on the table, and then she gave me a quick kiss. As soon as an awkward silence had begun permeate the air around us, she said, "So what was that article you wanted to show me?"

"Oh! The article! Thank you for reminding me."

"Yeah; don't mention it," she said, with an ever-so-slightly sarcastic smile.

"Well—there was a fireman who studied the interiors of the houses that he went into—after it was safe, anyway. And he came up with—"

A slight chill crystallized rather slowly along my spine as I saw it happen again. Just as Claire and Hakim had done, my friend Mark walked to the end of the table—his eyes frozen in a fixed gaze toward my own. This time, however, I was determined to finish my story before acknowledging him. Like the others, he simply stood there and said nothing. I turned back to Colleen. "Anyway, he ended up writing a memoir talking about what he learned by seeing how people lived."

"Hmm. Could you send that to me? I'm curious to see what he wrote about. It's nice to see that he was able to learn so much in an everyday situation—from his surroundings."

"Absolutely." Colleen grabbed my hand again but didn't start a conversation on another topic. Soon, an awkward silence had again begun to cloud the air. I had no problem ignoring Mark's frozen stare while there was an active conversation, but once it had dissipated, Mark's presence became magnetic and my attention was pulled toward him. After desperately fighting off the urge to do so for a few moments, I eventually lost my grip and was sucked in. I glanced over at Mark.

"Hey. How was work, man?"

I had already decompressed and didn't want to talk

about it. I replied, "good," and he walked away.

Two more of my Colleen's friends had done this before the end of our meal, and while being interrupted was certainly frustrating, I was beginning to think that we were doing comparatively well. There was another couple in the café, a tall blonde woman and a short man with round glasses who each appeared to have been about twenty years old, who had been harassed much more frequently than we had. We were only interrupted five times, but this couple had lines of people waiting to talk to them on both sides of the table; these lines never subsided at any point during their dinner. And unlike what had happened with Colleen and I, whenever they acknowledged and answered a friend, the friend would often get directly back in line. After a little while, this began to become competitive. People had been jockeying for positions in line, often deliberately cutting in front of some of the others.

In the end, however, Colleen and I still managed to have a decent conversation, even though it had been difficult—and even though we were on edge from being interrupted and watched by so many people. When we walked out of the café, Colleen gently slipped her arm around my own, and we began heading toward the park along the riverbank. When we were about a block away, I saw the one person I did not want to randomly meet.

It was my boss. I liked my boss and thought that he was a good person, but I knew he'd want to discuss a work-related topic. I tightly pulled on Colleen's arm and began to walk a little bit faster—hoping to lose him. However, he

walked even faster to catch up and then stopped right in front of us, turned around to face me, and then stared directly into my eyes. I had no choice but to acknowledge him.

"Anton, I'm sorry to bother you. I just have a quick question. Do you know what was on the form that we submitted for Jeremy McCarlin today?"

In a way, it felt wonderful to be needed. After all, I had worked two years in a job where the boss didn't give a damn whether I showed up at all. But this simply felt strange; they needed me, but they didn't need me so badly that they were willing to pay me overtime. I knew that my boss was not being paid overtime either, but that did not seem to matter; I still felt like I was being used. Nonetheless, his question was simple.

"McCarlin was promoted to foreman."

As soon as I responded, I knew it was a mistake. I knew he would be back the next time we went out.

2

Once we had arrived at the river, Colleen and I had agreed to ignore all unwelcome intruders for the rest of the night. However, that by no means meant that they did not come.

We sat down on the bench next to the riverbank and just looked at each other, at the night sky, and at the skyline of the city. After a while, however, I felt like we needed to talk about *something*. So we did.

Colleen started off the conversation. "So did your friend Hakim ever get to present his paper?"

"Yeah, he did. He said it went fairly well and that he got a lot of questions from the audience that really helped him."

"So what was the paper about, anyway?"

"Well—he was writing about the variations in social norms in urban and suburban neighborhoods."

"Hmm. That sound pretty interesting. So what's your take on it?" she asked, while lightly stroking on my arm.

"I think he was mostly right. People in cities, unlike in suburbs, have an opportunity to meet many more people—and structures like parks and plazas give people a common space to interact. I think it naturally follows that in a city, you end up ignoring most of the people that you meet in order to build closer relationships with a select few with whom you get along well. In the suburbs, people more often pick up friends based on circumstances like living near each other. I suppose it's harder to find something to do in the suburbs—not only because there are less things *to do*, but also because it's harder to find something that will interest everyone. In the city, it's easier to find interesting things to do because friends usually meet while doing something that interests them."

"Yeah. That sounds pretty reasonable," Colleen said.

"Of course, there's a challenge to the city as well. Living here takes constant effort. People will, of course, call you and initiate something, but unlike in the suburbs, they're not going to do it just because you're there."

Hmm—I thought. She's absolutely right. "Good point," I said. "I guess that's why the people who move to the city are so motivated to go after their dreams. They need to be. If they stop trying, they'll often be forgotten. Of course, there are others in the city who keep too many connections with no focus. I've always wondered how these people remember everyone—or for that matter, anything."

"Hmm. I could see that. You mean people who meet a network of people just to go out—rather than in some particular field? I wonder what Hakim would think about that."

For a brief moment, I looked up. On the opposite bench, staring rather blankly at Colleen and I, sat Hakim.

3

True to our mutual promise from earlier, we ignored Hakim this time, even though I would now have been in the mood for a discussion on his paper.

We took the train home, and Hakim got on as well. He was clearly following us, but we continued to ignore him. When we got home, we locked all of the doors and windows, leaving Hakim behind. We turned off the lights and crawled into bed, thankful that we were finally alone.

Colleen and I hugged each other and cuddled together. Her voice had become a bit softer as she whispered, "I love you, Anton," in my ear.

I gave her a quick kiss on the forehead, brushed my

lips against hers, and said, "I love you, too."

Her hand ventured to a place along my body which only she knew would excite me, and my hand quickly followed suit to a sensitive region of her own. We kissed again, this time with a bit more passion, as I set her body down gently on the mattress. As soon as her back had touched the bed, we heard a quiet thud. Her eyes had undergone a transformation from being almost closed to two white disks the size of hockey pucks, and though we couldn't see it, we both knew what it was. Hakim was staring into the window.

Colleen stopped kissing me, but she continued to hold on to me—this time even tighter than before. I got out of bed, went to the window, and our suspicions were indeed correct. After checking the locks on both of the windows, I yelled, "Fuck off!" and closed the blinds.

I thought about calling the police, but after seeing how many people had followed us throughout the evening, I decided that there was no point in doing so. The problem we were facing was much larger than Hakim. Besides, the police would just laugh at us and think we were delusional. I knew this was not going to go away, so I threw a blanket around Colleen and we began cuddling again—though to say we were cuddling would perhaps have been a gross overstatement. We merely went through the motions like an assembly line worker adding a part to a machine. We had gone through these motions so many times that they came without conscious thought—and conscious thought we had certainly

lacked. We held each other as we would if we were on the train, rather than our bedroom—like someone was watching, because that someone almost certainly was.

And I was right. The problem *was* larger than Hakim. After a few minutes under the blanket, I heard the door turn. Creaking ever so quietly on the floor was another unwelcome visitor. Colleen wanted to remove the blanket, but my hand pushing down on her chest encouraged her not to do so. I pointedly grabbed her breast over her shirt, and she realized that she was not fully dressed, so the blanket stayed on. I had no idea who it was, but I knew that he or she was going to stand near us and stare until one of us responded. Eventually, she coughed, and I could tell from the resonating sound that it was Claire. “Well,” I whispered in Colleen’s ear, “I guess we’re stuck.”

She had a look of hysteria on her face which did not quickly subside. I tried my best to console her, but I wasn’t any better-off myself. “It’s dark,” I said, “And we have a blanket on. She can’t see us.” That was the best that I could do.

“Maybe if I just respond to Claire, she’ll go away. Besides, what if it’s important?”

“Maybe she will. But think about what we’ve already seen tonight. As soon as you respond, someone else is just going to come barging in here anyway. I think we should just try our best to get some sleep.”

“But what if Claire needs me?” It was at that moment that I realized what was scaring her; it wasn’t the fact that our creepy friends were watching us in bed. She was scared that

she might miss something important.

“Look,” I stated, much more confidently that I had before. “If Claire really needs you, she’ll call a bunch of times or tell one of our neighbors to come interrupt us. She wouldn’t just stand there and not say anything.”

Her eyes had suggested that I had just eaten a tarantula. With great pain, she muttered, “You’re probably right. I know you are. But—” I felt her leg convulse underneath my own, as she remained silent for a brief moment. “What if you’re not?”

I looked into her eyes for a moment and tried my best to empathize with her. “I know this could be important. But I hope you realize that just like everyone else who stared at us tonight, she probably just wants some attention, and you can give it to her later much more easily—and more sincerely. I’ll tell you what—if it really is an emergency, I’ll go to her tomorrow and apologize. But please remember—we did make a promise to each other to ignore them.”

She took a deep breath, stared into my eyes for a moment, collapsed against the bed, and said, “I know. We did.” She wrapped her arm a bit tighter against my back. “Okay.”

We said nothing else for what seemed like an eternity. I moved her body into the position in which we normally slept and held her. I knew I wasn’t going to fall asleep until she did. A shake. A small shiver. Her legs wrapped tightly around mine. I could tell that she was really trying, but I was almost sure it wasn’t going to happen.

Then, her eyes gently closed. She whispered, “I love

you,” and we shared a brief kiss. Her body went limp. We had made it.

“I love you, too.” I gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead, and instantly, I fell asleep.

4

It was a miracle! When we woke up, the stalkers were gone. We searched in the closet, the bathroom, the kitchen. We opened the door and looked behind the house. Not a soul was in sight.

Colleen turned to me. “Good morning, babe,” she said in the most calm voice I had heard in weeks.

“And good morning to you too, my dear. I must say—you seem particularly relaxed today.”

“Absolutely. I feel wonderful!” She looked at me, looked at the window, looked at me, and then she grabbed my hand. “Come with me,” she said, giving me absolutely no hint as to where she was about to lead me. But it didn't matter; I was going with her, and she dragged me across the kitchen and ran out the door.

5

She pulls on my arm. We start running, and I let go of her hand but continue to keep up with her. I still have no idea where we are going, but I know from the look on her face that it will lead to something beautiful. We see that there

are no cars on the street in front of us, and we keep our pace as we dart across.

I am moving quickly enough to see the forest within the urban jungle. I see one tree—a beat-up Honda planted in the middle of the road, double-parked. I see another—a homeless man on the corner. Seeing that I am running, he knows I will not be able to give him anything, but he senses our energy and smiles at us. The forest becomes clearer as we approach the highway—as I see the flow of movement in the city, people exchanging positions in its infinite number of intersections, and the effort put forth by millions to achieve their goals and to keep it vibrant. It is a beautiful sight, and for once, I feel as if I am a part of it—not just an atom under pressure, in conflict with many others for my space.

And then I see my boss chasing after us. Colleen looks back, but she is far too engrossed in where we are going to be able to decipher his face. “Keep running, babe,” she says. But I don't need her encouragement now; there is no way I am about to pay him my attention after remembering how frustrated he had made me last night.

A few others join in the chase. We both take a glance backward and then realize that it doesn't matter who is behind us. It could be Claire, Hakim, Mark, or anyone, and as Colleen turns toward me and smiles, I realize why we are running. We are running together so that we can share an experience in private. We are running because we are both fully convinced that we will win this battle.

She leads me into the park we visited last night—merely a tree in the urban jungle, but yet a forest in its own

right. I am so aware of my surroundings, my adrenaline so elevated, that I notice every last detail around me. I notice a few buds sprouting on an elm tree to my left, the river straight ahead, an older woman reading a novel on the bench to my right. And I can tell that Colleen shares my awareness. "Look, Anton! A crocus!" she says as she points ahead. As we run, we are finally beginning to capture and understand the beautiful essence of our world.

Before we can say another word, our destination appears in front of us. Colleen doesn't need to tell me where we are headed; I already know. In front of us is a large telephone tower. We approach the tower and notice that my boss and the two others are still following us.

Colleen, who is normally scared by dangerous adventures, makes the first move. She grabs the first rung on the ladder adjacent to the tower. She pulls herself up and grabs the second. Rung by rung, she starts climbing. I follow behind her. Within two minutes, we reach the top of the tower. There is a small place to sit, and we take a seat.

Looking down, I notice that my boss has started climbing the tower—a little bit more slowly than we had. On the path in the park, we see Hakim and Claire behind him—both exhibiting zombie-like stares. Colleen and I pull out our phones. On my phone, there are two text messages—one from my boss and one from Hakim. On Colleen's, there is one—from Claire.

"I know how to solve our problem!" Colleen exclaims. She grabs my hand again—this time placing it on the wire which connects the tower to the next. Gathering all

of the strength within me, I tug on the cable until it is unplugged, and it falls onto the ground below. I reach for my phone, grab the tower tightly to maintain my balance, and throw it as far as I can—into the river. Colleen follows, and within seconds, I hear the thud of her phone hitting the water.

We turn and look downward at the ladder, and as we do, we instantly embrace each other upon seeing the results. My boss is gone! Hakim is gone! Claire is gone! They had disappeared. We are finally alone!

I look at Colleen, grab her back tightly, and we kiss like no one is watching; this time, no one is. We climb down the ladder and take a seat on the bench below. Suddenly, the park around me fades away. Colleen, at this moment, is my whole world; I see only her and some shadows around us. In my peripheral vision, I see some people walking past on the path. They could be close friends, complete strangers, white people, black people, older people, little kids. This I will never know. But I do know one thing—they aren't staring at us, and they aren't standing there, awkwardly awaiting a response!

We look at each other and say absolutely nothing for several minutes. This time, there is no awkward silence. This time, we are engulfed in a passion of a proportion which we had never before felt. This time, we realize how beautiful it can be to do absolutely nothing except spend time with each other.

We make a few jokes; we tease each other; we sit together and watch life in the city go by.

After about an hour, Colleen tells me that she needs to get some work done.

"Sure. No problem," I tell her. "Do you want to meet here at seven?"

"Yeah. I'd love to," she says. "But wait! How am I going to do that without a phone?"

"Well, I'll come here at seven. And you come here too. Okay?"

"But what if I'm late?"

"Well—try not to be. But if you are, I'll wait for a while. People have been doing this for thousands of years. We'll be fine."

"Okay. Sounds good to me," she says.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

We shared a kiss, and then we began living our lives.