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On the Tram

Becca dabbed at her nose, leaving a snail's trail of moisture on the tissue. She was sensitive to changes in the weather, even sudden shifts in temperature when the AC kicked on. A single particle of dust, airborne, could be enough to tickle her sinuses into sneezing, so it seemed anyway. Many things seemed possible, and the greatest of these hinged on her staying healthy.

What, more than likely, was a common cold or allergies could be misconstrued as some dread disease. There might be a quarantine in her future. Luckily, she had tested negative for everything her doctor had thought to test her for. Still, she didn't want to have to go around explaining this to everyone, certainly not to total strangers. She had her HIPAA rights and her dignity. She would not permit a few sniffles to ruin her.

If she had been ordered to quarantine, it wouldn't have been that hard—one of the few perks of living alone. Her space was her space as long as she remained in her one-bedroom apartment. Out in the world beyond that, she had to assert herself to avoid being perceived as too unassuming. People were not necessarily rude, but tended to get wrapped up in their own affairs, and these, for the most part, did not include her. She operated just below the level of notice and enjoyed this at times. But others, it could be a great inconvenience to be overlooked and underestimated, and if neither had been her intention at that moment, she would exert a conscious effort to make the offender pay disproportionately. Such was her pleasure and a skill she deemed critical to her survival. If the world could turn nasty and brutish, so could she. But for the most part, she considered herself a very nice person.

All those negative tests gave her license to set out on the tram. She had business in the city to attend to. She took a canvas satchel for groceries and a comfortable pair of shoes for walking, and procured coffee and brioche while she waited at the stop. A neighborhood vendor had surprisingly good versions of both that he peddled from a cart.

She told him what she wanted, and he took her money in exchange for her order without the slightest hint of recognition that they had repeated this very scene at least three times each of the past two weeks. She knew his name was Marcus, though she saw no reason to let on that she knew. She thanked him civilly and received the same curt nod as day one. Something seemed to occupy his attention in the

distance.

Marcus was walking a dangerous line, she decided. If his wares hadn't been exceptional, she would have dismissed him long ago.

Generally, the tram was not crowded at this hour of the morning. Most of the commuters set out early, and apparently not that many of her neighbors enjoyed Becca's leisure or else they chose to spend it differently. That's not to say she wasn't aware of the occasional familiar face, even an interesting one or two, but it did mean she'd grown used to having a bank of seats to herself with plenty of elbow room. If too many people then boarded at a later stop, a well-timed coughing fit was just the thing to preserve the sovereignty of her realm, keeping would-be interlopers at bay.

There was, however, one individual who sometimes boarded at Broad Street for whom she gladly would have made an exception. His was one of the interesting faces she'd noted, and his motions seemed as meandering as she imagined her own to be. When she saw him, she wanted to gesture toward him, pat the seat next to her, and invite him to sit, but even if she had worked up the boldness to do this, his expression always seemed so dreamily elsewhere, that Becca scarcely believed he would have even noticed, and she would not have faulted him for this. To Becca, in this stranger's case, interesting meant handsome, but also personable in some way she could not quite get a handle on. What she did know was she wanted to keep looking, and in return she wanted to be seen—by this man, anyway.

She stole glances between sips of her coffee, the brioche had long been retired to the canvas bag or consumed well before Broad Street. She did not wish to be seen eating on the off chance the handsome stranger looked her way.

Though their journey together lasted no more than half an hour, she always felt a mild but poignant sense of loss when they parted, and if their paths did not cross at all that day on the tram, the sensation was something closer to despair. But not for long. The sights of the city soon took her out of herself, and a brisk walk did wonders for the soul.

Even the much-maligned city air arrived as a tonic—the floral perfumes from window boxes, whiffs of world-class restaurants as their kitchens prepared for the day, and something less recognizable yet detectable: the spray of fountains, possibly, when the wind was blowing in just the perfect, unpredictable way. Bracing—that's how she would describe it if she had the slightest inkling who might like to hear her thoughts on the matter. Maybe one day she would discuss this with the interesting stranger. In the meantime, the entire city unfolded before her.

She took a roundabout route on her way to the market. She

Kestrel

could have found all the groceries she could possibly need, and then some, at one of the supermarkets closer to home. And for some things, that couldn't stand to be off ice long, she would need to make a trip there later. But her destination was the open air market that sprawled a few blocks from the river. Somehow it managed to survive year-round, and she was determined to do her part to support it. Farmers and artisans piled tables with goods daily, and while there were noticeably more of them on the weekends, they were accompanied by an uptick in the number of tourists.

Becca preferred to do her shopping on weekdays, and within an hour she could fill her bag with all manner of seasonal vegetables. Her habit, though, was to peruse the entire market for an hour or so before making her selections. That way she could stretch out the experience for maximum pleasure. These trips were about much more than simply stocking her larder.

Unlike aloof Marcus, the vendors here were sociable and friendly. Many of them recognized her and made efforts at chit-chat. Sometimes the newer ones tried too hard to make a sale, but the others who knew her limited themselves to a smile and a kind word on her first pass, and when and if they saw her return, they would become extra attentive.

She tended to reward these sensitive souls by buying extra honey or perhaps artisanal soaps she didn't really need. But she also tended to make special allowances for heirloom vegetables, even when the purveyors themselves did something that disappointed her. She was learning to be more forbearing in her middle years, only taking her revenge, generally, against the people who really had it coming. There were fewer of these nowadays, but the number was not zero. A very unfortunate incident had transpired only recently.

Becca had been seeking whole grain breads—these were best for her digestive system, she'd concluded. She still enjoyed brioche of course, but she wanted to introduce something like a good oat bran into her diet at other meals as a compromise. Hector, the usual baker, was not present that morning and a very rude young woman who refused to give Becca her name had taken possession of his table. It was unclear to Becca whether she was simply filling in for Hector or if the loaves she was offering were creations of her own. In any case, this impertinent young woman seemed completely indifferent to Becca and her business. She stood by the table, eyes glued to a phone she periodically scrolled through.

“Ma'am, can you help me?” Becca asked, despite being on her first walk through. She was unsettled by Hector's absence and hoped this person could supply some answers.

The woman continued interacting with the phone, stroking the

screen with her finger. Right when Becca began to step away, she looked up. "Did you want to buy something?"

Becca was taken aback. Hector would never have been so brusque. Could this possibly be his replacement?

"I was hoping I might see Hector."

"Hector's not here today." The woman seemed to study Becca now, her gaze direct and challenging. After an uncomfortable moment, her expression lost much of its intensity. She appeared to arrive at some conclusion she found sufficient and was just about to raise her phone again when Becca blurted out, "Oat bran."

"What?" the woman said, scrunching up her face as though she'd found this distasteful.

"I was wondering if you had any oat-bran loaves this morning."

"No. We don't sell that."

"Hector does."

"You'll have to ask him when he comes back."

"Will he be here next week?"

"He didn't say."

The woman was already back to her phone, now typing in a text message.

Becca waited patiently. She wondered if maybe the woman was texting Hector about oat bran. But it soon became apparent that Becca was no longer on the woman's mind at all. Something she saw on the phone made her smile in a derisive way. Suddenly, she looked up at Becca as though she'd caught her spying on her. "Anything else?" she said.

Becca didn't like the sharp tone of the woman's voice. "No. That will be all."

The woman rolled her eyes and just as quickly seemed to forget about Becca again, who was now seething. Her first impulse was to overturn the woman's table. But it was technically Hector's table, and in any case, Becca knew she did not have the authority to do this. She would walk away, do without bread, and process everything once her emotions cooled.

She wanted to know how this woman might be connected to Hector, who was always so nice and attentive. Should she let him know about the woman's rude treatment of her, or would it merely get lost in the telling? Come across as some kind of tantrum or perhaps simply a contrivance on Becca's part over missing out on oat bran?

But now the seed of doubt had been sown. If this woman were somehow close to Hector, the thought of Becca's bread money possibly going toward her phone bill was unthinkable. She would have to look for another baker in the city at once.

However, there was no point in letting one disappointing

interaction derail what might still turn into an agreeable morning. She bypassed the other tables where someone might call out with an offer of a free sample and headed for the fruit trees—a miniature grove, as it were, of potted plants and flowers. The green, nonjudgmental leaves brought solace, and even the sneeze brought on by a sudden burst of pollen was forgivable. She was beginning to feel like herself again.

Hector returned the following week, but so did the rude girl. Becca wasn't sure if stopping by the table or skipping it entirely was the better thing to do. She'd hoped never to lay eyes on the girl again. At the very least, she'd hoped for a moment alone with Hector to air her grievances. But neither of those options was available.

The girl saw her and cracked a sly smile. So there it is, thought Becca. The decision has been made for me. She reversed course immediately, keeping well clear of the table. She wondered if Hector might have seen her, or if not, whether he might be looking for her. In the end, she decided he probably wouldn't give her a second thought, whether he'd seen her or not.

She marveled at how cynical she had become. But wasn't it true? She wondered how many of the vendors would even notice if she suddenly stopped showing up. Now she grew ashamed because she realized she was feeling sorry for herself, and that was one character flaw she'd made a conscious effort to expunge. These trips to the city, in fact, had started as a result of her most recent campaign against self pity. Stepping outside of herself was the key, she'd decided. But now she wasn't so sure. At least as long as she remained close to herself, she had that going for her. Why alienate herself from herself—her last remaining ally? No one else had rushed in to fill the void, and she no longer deluded herself, waiting.

She bought an extra amount of everything that morning, but nothing from Hector. With her bag loaded up, she returned to the tram stop early. She would forego an extra couple of hours in the city for the solace of her bed. Then when she woke, she would peel vegetables and throw them together into a soup before soaking herself in a tub of the day's bath salts.

She could already imagine her fingers wrinkling with saturation, when a voice stirred her. "You dropped this."

The handsome man from the tram was extending a turnip—apparently hers. Not quite trusting her senses, she looked down at her tilted bag. Yes, it was quite likely the escaped turnip was hers.

She accepted it timidly but graciously, she hoped. The man sat down next to her and said, "I see you on the morning commute, I think. Gavin." Now he was holding out his hand again, but there was no turnip to take. She saw that there was nothing in it. She thought about what

else she had in the bag. Bath salts? No. She settled on offering him her hand.

Gavin seemed satisfied with this, and he shook it. Becca was amazed how someone she had only observed previously at a distance and with interest was now literally within her grasp. “Becca,” she said. “I board before Broad. Funny I’ve never seen you on the way home.” Then she realized it wasn’t funny at all. She was a full two hours earlier than usual. Now she wondered what Gavin had done with his own day. What kind of hours were these to be keeping?

Becca tried remembering, instead, the rules of conversation. She knew them once, some of them anyway. But now her mind was a blank, and she started to hum. The first song that came to mind was “Under Paris Skies,” even though they were nowhere near Paris. She also vaguely knew that her humming was not at all in tune. But to her surprise and delight, Gavin began to accompany her with his own, markedly more melodious humming. He knew the tune.

They had a good laugh afterward, though apparently neither quite knew why, and all Becca could think to say was, “A turnip for your supper, sir,” and once again Gavin was holding the turnip.

None of this was going as she imagined, but somewhere during the tram ride it was decided that Gavin would visit her apartment for soup that very afternoon. She did not mention the bath salts.

As a rule, Becca did not allow strangers in her home, not even interesting ones. And yet here was Gavin sitting at her kitchen table. She had him peeling vegetables. It all seemed very natural all of a sudden, and they talked as they worked, not of an unfamiliar past or an uncertain future but only of the task at hand, the shared project of a pot of soup.

“How big should I make the cubes?” asked Gavin.

She took his hand still clutching the knife and guided him, showing him exactly what she wanted.

When he was done, she took the knife from him. “Isn’t it time for you to be leaving?” she said.

“But the soup isn’t even cooked yet.”

“Yes, but you’d better go.”

Gavin seemed confused but did not try to argue. Once he’d left, Becca wondered what she had done. Why had she sent him away? She hunched over the cauldron and stirred, letting the hot vapors almost scald her face. The steam got so hot, she squinted, still stirring. She would change the locks in the morning.

