



Fish Out of Time

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He looked like he was sleeping at first. His hair was brown and tousled under a rumpled baseball hat. His head seemed impossibly big, but then I saw his body, which was abnormally large and amorphous, like a clown who's wilted by the end of a birthday party. His stomach fell over his lap under the table, and his shoes – they were once runners but now almost melted around his feet from wear – were like the bulbous base of a mountain. I don't know how I didn't notice him in the coffee shop because now he was taking up more than just this space. It was like he had the consistency of a whole world, even if it was a gelatinous one.

I thought he was sleeping – not only sleeping, maybe dead. There's always that brief flash of heightened curiosity or even, I hate to say it, but thrill, when you come across someone and can't exactly tell if maybe they had just died. But when you're in public and don't know the person you've just set your sights on, the amount of time it takes to actually panic stretches. Of course, the element of intuition is now gone; whatever energy exists between you and this stranger is one that is shared by everyone, whether they are taking stock of the situation or not. The energy between loved ones is more exclusive, possessive almost, and definitely intuitive. This is interpreted by lovers at the peak of their love as intimacy, in the psychology books at least. *Personal space* that we allow our lover into – not a hair could go out of place without a keen eye there to regard it with a lingering smile.

What about this man? He looked like he'd been sleeping so long with no one who cared where he was or if he was coming back. Had he ever gotten to grant anyone the privilege of entering his personal space? He might never have had this kind of sharing in his whole life.

As I watched him, before I could become truly anxious, he jumped in his seat, startled by his awakening, and – no, he didn't look around to see if anyone had noticed him slumped with his eyes closed. I thought he would. Most people do, and then pretend they didn't. This happens on the subway all the time.

He had a pencil in his hand, an old orange HB. He immediately resumed a crossword he was working on. Just then, a woman came in with her dog, a mangy, faded brown creature that never uttered a sound. She looked at me vaguely, to acknowledge that she was about to encroach on my space. *The chair's empty, get over it, you little ...!* her eyes snapped. I didn't have time to respond with my eyes: *little what? it's ok, you can sit where you like, and by the way, don't judge a book by it's cover*, before she swiveled around on the

armrest, her back to me. I looked down at my book. She whipped out a cell phone and dialed as she shook her other hand through her matted hair. It hadn't been dyed or brushed in awhile. Her jeans, I noticed, had spots on them and rode her waist a little too high than was trendy. *Yah. Yah. Yah*, she said into the phone, *whatever*. Her voice was raspy. She snapped the phone closed and muttered, *I don't know if dogs are allowed here but I need a coffee*.

As she got up, I caught the large man in my peripheral vision and again he looked like he might be dead. I was curious about how a man that large could be so silent as he dozed and wondered what his neurons and cells were talking about inside of him, because whatever it was, it was more than sleeping he was doing. I've read that when neurons talk to each other, it's called *synapses*, which to me sounds a bit like *smiles*.

The noise of the woman clanking away brought him out of his reverie, and like before, he immediately resumed his crossword. At least, that's what I initially thought was happening. But this time I watched his process more carefully. He grimaced slightly, as though he had indigestion and, never taking his eyes off the page (I couldn't see yet that his eyes were never positioned to fix on anything), he inched closer and closer to the table. Without ever jerking his head back up like most people do when they're semi-consciously fighting off sleep, he simply fell right into the table. Almost plowed into it, but with a slow, balletic kind of grace. I'd never seen anything like this excruciating dance his head was doing with the tabletop. Like his body was already in another stratosphere, much lighter and of course free, and was begging this earthly version of himself to hurry up and say goodbye already. *I'm too tired to even hear you anymore*, his head could have been saying to the freer him.

Whyyyyyy, said a siren suddenly in my head. It was half question, half plea for someone to take me out of here. *You can get up and walk out*, the same siren in my head came back with. *Why didn't you know that? Whyyyyyy...*

The woman with the matted hair disappeared and never came back, unless something happened to her or her dog in the bathroom. There was another woman in the chair next to me now, an older woman. It wasn't often you saw someone like her in a coffee shop like this, unless something was wrong. And it was.

(I should point out that by "a coffee shop like this" I mean the kind, especially in an affluent neighbourhood like this, that most people drop into to buy coffee-to-go. The people who stay tend to be the types of middle-aged women who make coffee dates on a regular basis, and the average types you see everywhere – not young nor old, not grotesque nor magnificent, that come in to read or work on their laptops. This is not the type of coffee shop that young people hang out in,

and it's not in an area of town that tends to the stranger among us. How I ended up here, to be honest, is a mystery to me, strange as that sounds.)

The old lady was definitely older than she appeared at first glance. She wore a fur coat that could be described as old but only in the sense that all fur coats were old now unless they were faux and being worn under the false assumption that it was possible to be ironic about this sort of thing (some ladies just like their fur and feel extravagant in it, no matter how they or their publicists spin it). For this lady, it was just a coat, a well-preserved one at that, and you wear nice coats when you go out. Especially if you don't go out often, and the last time you did go out often people tended to wear nice clothes as a matter of custom, like you see in the Victorian Age films.

Looking good was important for this lady, I could see, and because the effort it took to get there was more visible than the result she was looking for, an incredible sadness came over me. Everything about her made me want to cry. Her hair was halfway to auburn but singed at the ends and grey at the roots. Her lipstick was the deepest hot pink, smudged loosely over her non-existent lips. Foundation sat in little puddles in the crevices of her wrinkled skin and occasionally, dried bits of it flaked off and disappeared in the bottomless fur of her coat. She smelled like moth balls.

Another siren went off, this time not in my head but outside on the street. I turned quickly around. There was a man at the window counter working away on his laptop and beyond him I could see an ambulance go by, wailing as it went. *Get out of there!* it seemed to be saying directly to me. It got louder as the ambulance slowed to turn the corner right by where we sat. I live in that direction, I thought. Then the sound of the ambulance faded.

The old lady had a plate in front of her, sitting on the table we shared. She had bought a square cake or brownie of some sort. It had a glaze on it that made it look like a gift-wrapped present, more plastic than edible. For the second time that afternoon I wondered how I didn't notice something, in this case, a lady in a bulky coat approaching the server and painstakingly going about ordering a shiny cake and paying for it.

I always consider myself such an observant person. An old man who used to live on my street would watch me walk past him, hands in pocket, glancing this way and that, and would sometimes say, *You're not seeing the forest, my girl. Where's the forest?* I didn't understand this for a long time until I found out it was part of a proverb about seeing so many trees you can't see they actually form a forest. I guess I always feel I'm looking out from somewhere that seems to be so deep inside of me it's a wonder it reaches out to find so many little details that are out there in the world and nowhere near me. You'd think that something so deep inside – a place I don't

understand and can't locate if asked to point to it, or even visualize it – would have very serious and even premeditated things to deal with, but as far as I'm concerned at least, it goes straight to picking at the little details.

Even with a book in front of me I'm observing. It's true that at home I could lose myself in a book for a whole day at a time, but when I'm out, other things pull me away from my reading, like it's what I'm fated to do, to be pulled away. I never have a book on me as a decoy, though. I'm always doing a few things at once, and when I stop doing one thing, that thing continues to hover and joins me in my next activity. It stays with me like a ghost. The image of the lady's cake took up a large corner of my mind as I returned to my book, which was about the study of fish tanks as viable ecosystems and about marine life in general. I don't normally read books like this and fish are not interesting to me in the least, but I found it on a bench and wanted to know more about the man who had just gotten up and left it behind.

But before I get distracted with the man on the bench, I want to return to this old lady, because as I said, she was making me feel like I was going to burst into tears, and this doesn't happen to me often. I don't come from a family of criers. I would even go so far as to say that crying is frowned upon.

The lady never took her coat off. She sat there, upright in her rigid little armchair, and she knelt down ever so slightly to reach her cake with outstretched arms. It never dawned on her to grab the plate, bring it closer to her, and bite into the cake. Instead, she took hold of the cake with one hand and broke off a little piece of it with the other, and began what turned out to be the monumental task of bringing it to her mouth. That's when I noticed the shaking. Her fingers trembled like a little earthquake. With every movement she made, it was like the whole energy field of the room was going to spill over out of the nervousness of this one action. As she took the piece to her mouth, bits of it crumbled and fell into her furry coat. She struggled to get the piece of cake into her mouth. Her neck and head were trembling too. She must have Parkinson's, I thought, and it must have been an enormous strain to get out of bed in the morning, never mind all dressed up, *just to go to a coffee shop for some bad, stale cake that they covered up with shiny glaze*. The thought that this was the only place she had to go is what did it. The tears began to well up but I squeezed them back in.

She never looked at me. Maybe she was used to people staring, or maybe her vision wasn't that good and she didn't see me watching her eat. I imagined that she had lost her husband some time ago but still carried him with her everywhere, so that she had company and didn't need to mind about the strangers in the room. This way she was never alone. *Come on love*, she would say silently in a few minutes, *I'm all finished up. Let's go home*. The thought of her having

her husband nearby made me feel better.

For now, she was still eating, bit by aching bit. I closed my book. The title leaped out to me, like it did when I first saw it. It sounded like a poem: *Dynamic Aquaria, Second Edition: Building Living Ecosystems*. When I first found it, it was dog-eared on page 35. The subsection to this chapter (Chapter 2: *The Envelope: Physical Parameters and Energy State*), has the most elegant sound of all, so I started reading there, and haven't gone back to the beginning since. The section is called, *Tides: Simulating the Effect of Sun and Moon*. I could picture the man from the bench who was reading this book going home, looking into his fish tank, and wondering how he could make life better for his fish, that maybe life would be better if they could feel like a real sun was beating down on them, and a real moon was out there to align them, that they could dream about visiting someday. I thought that maybe the man was thinking that way about himself, that maybe he wanted to be in some faraway place that was impossible for him to reach. *It will never happen for me*, he was saying, so instead he created an environment for his pet fish that would allow them to master their little universes. I felt like I wanted to cry that afternoon too, on the bench.

I'd quickly leafed through the table of contents and decided then and there that I was never going to read Chapter 16: *Carnivores: Predators of Animals*. Had a carnivore ever eaten a household pet fish? I'd never had pets, but I couldn't imagine a dog swooping in there to pluck out fish for a snack. It seemed like an obscene thing for a dog to do. Anyway, something about the name of this chapter caused goosebumps to appear all over my arms. It didn't seem to fit with the theme of the book, where fish were going to be given a new home so they could thrive out of their natural habitat. Wouldn't the ocean have more carnivores in it than in the household of the man on the bench?

But I was rationalizing. The truth of it was that when I read these words, and thought about those poor fish away from their homes and facing the threat of animals larger than themselves, something came over me that I can't explain, something that seemed to have to do with the beginning of time and deep, dark things I would never understand, maybe because no one I know reads books anymore.

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Excuse, me, but do you have the time? The old lady was talking to me. Her smile revealed yellow teeth that looked even yellower against the bright pink lipstick that was now smeared across her upper chin. I was thrown off guard for a minute, but quickly recovered and looked at my watch. I told her that it was 4:10. *Four ten in the afternoon*, she said, her voice trailing

off.

Florida! the large man said, sitting upright and clutching his pencil. *Will somebody help me?*

The old lady gazed about, looking for the source of the sound, her head shaking all over the place. Then she found him.

What does that man want help with? the old lady asked me. I wanted to scream, *I don't know, why are you talking to me? What is wrong with everyone in here?*

And then I thought about the man on the bench, and I knew. I'd known all along. I wish I had talked more about him. At this point it's too much to get into, but I will say that he was the only person I've known to speak with this kind of harsh honesty: *just because everyone makes a point of telling you you're the same as everyone else doesn't mean they mean it, or know what they're talking about. You know that.* So, yes, we did talk; I had lost sight of him at first, but I managed to catch up somehow – I don't know how, because that part of it's hazy, but I followed him home Not that any of that matters now.

Not even this: as I sat there on the bench, watching him walk away, it was clearer to me than anything that he had no face. I had approached the bench from behind. It was located to the left of the main entrance to a modest-sized church built mostly out of old brick. The bench was wooden and newer than the church and it had scratch marks on it, like people had played mindlessly on it with jack knives. The man had gotten up as soon as I turned the corner and was already walking away by the time I got to the bench. He wasn't old exactly. He wasn't walking slowly or hunched over, but something about his energy made me feel like he was an older man; he wasn't walking lightly like young people do. It was almost like he wasn't moving at all, but he kept getting farther and farther away.

I could have shouted out to him. *Mister! Your book!* But it was like there was an invisible string joining the man to the book, which told me either that he had finished the book and no longer needed it, or that he left it there for some other reason, maybe an important one. I looked at the book and it seemed to glow a little. When I looked back up, the man was gone.

How did I know he had no face? Because not only did he never turn around, and wasn't ever going to turn around, but I got the feeling that he had never turned around for anyone, ever. He was the man who disappeared around corners, who sat on benches you only saw from so far away that you couldn't make out any particular features, only a lump sitting there, because you were on the street walking by without looking, and he was sitting on the premises of a church that no one ever came in or out of. Most of the time these benches by churches were completely empty and at one time or another

there will be someone sitting there, and is there really any difference? If anything, the empty benches talk louder, because when you look at them you think about things beyond your immediate sphere of knowledge, like ancient times and the bustling activity of churches and people who pray and study the scriptures handed down to them. Things that get into your brain from your parents' brains and their parents before that, and on and on like that (you get those things stuck inside your head, but never any clues about what to do with them or how to feel about them). A man on a normally empty bench, if you see him, just makes you want to cry out a little to the gods who must be nearby if they are there at all, because this is a church, and you want to say to them: *Take us back, already! What are you waiting for?*

I don't really want to tell you about what happened when I got up and followed the faceless man home, because I fall over my words when I try to think about how I got from there to here, this coffee shop where everything is wrong. But I did get here, I ended up here to look around and see all these things, and I know that the minute I got up from my chair with my book about fish tucked under my arm, something was going to happen. The man with the laptop wouldn't have anything to do with it as far as he was concerned. He had been paying no attention to the world of the coffee shop behind him, or the street in front of him. But he was the only one who could have done something to fix this horrible thing that was going to pull each and every one of us apart. We were going to fall right to the depths of this place and he could have sucked us right back into the thick of it and into his safe world of charts and spreadsheets, because he wouldn't have seen a reason not to. It would have been that easy for him, to just turn to me and say, *Can I ask you a question about this survey I'm working on?* and it would have changed everything. It would have made it normal again. It's just that he didn't know he needed to, or that he could have saved us. He didn't know that the woman with the too-high jeans and tousled hair and cell phone was still in the bathroom – none of us did – and if he had known or gone to the bathroom himself, he might have been forced to see what was already all around him, albeit more acutely. As it happened, it took her running out of the bathroom shrieking and throwing her phone across the room, right into the window by his head, for him to turn around to see. And it was too late by then.

Don't fall, my head was saying. *Don't fall*. My mind was jumping out of the coffee shop and down the street to where the ambulance was parked in front of my apartment. But I couldn't go, not because I couldn't face what I was going to ultimately find there (and I knew what that was going to be), but because I had to remain fixed in my chair, with the old trembling lady next to me and the large slumbering man a few feet away. Disrupting the air in here now would be like taking the water out of fish tank.

I squeezed my eyes shut and remained perfectly still. Then I heard it. Silence. *Ahhh*, I thought to myself. *The sirens inside*

and out are gone. Maybe I've been wrong about all this. Maybe there's hope.

I opened my eyes.

Florida, the large man said. A bit of drool fell down his cheek as he smiled.

I used to winter in Florida, the old woman said back, though she didn't look at him. She wasn't looking at anyone we could see, but her eyes shone with happiness. *Have you ever been?* This question was directed at me. At first I couldn't do it, but then I did. I met her gaze.

I have never been to Florida, I told her. *But I've read that there's an annual event where people from Florida head to the state line and toss dead fish into Alabama. I never understood why anyone would want to do that. Who cleans up after this sort of event, and where do the fish go?*

I got lost in thought as I talked about this and didn't notice that the old lady wasn't listening to me. Then the siren in my head came back.

You lost your chance! it said. The siren wailed until I lost control of all my senses and it was all I could do to remain in my seat, clutching my book and trying to appear normal.

I think I'm going to have another piece of cake, said the lady as she ever so slowly put into motion the process of getting out of her chair. The large man gave a little cry as his pencil flew out of his hand and rolled out of sight.

Why, dear, said the lady, *it can't be that bad. Just open the book and read. You must have brought it here for a reason.*

I looked down, closed my eyes, and repeated what she had said to myself. Then I gingerly opened the book. Maybe she was right. Maybe she was so right that I was going to go back to the beginning and read every single word. Maybe the book, like the man on the bench who couldn't save me any more than he could suddenly have a face, was like the sun and the moon that could make our ecosystem complete.

A book about fish, I said. *Imagine that.*

Florida, the man said.

Yes, this cake is delicious, said the old woman. *I simply have to have the recipe.*

journalistic, fiction and poetry - has been published widely, in magazines such as *POV*, *Montage*, *Cinema Scope* and *The Broken City*. Her limited edition book of photography about Toronto graffiti, *Tag It! A City's Imagination Revolution*, sold out at Pages Books in Toronto. She is at work revising her first novella based on the comments of enthusiastic peers.

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