

Third Persons

The man had been there for an hour at least, empty eyes, unmoving. Marty looked at him from time to time, wondering... In the meantime, he continued juggling.

A kid stopped in front of Marty and smiled, a worried-looking woman in her mid-30s catching up a moment later yelling something about obedience and respect, determined not to let street entertainment interfere with her shopping. The kid ignored her, fascinated by the spectacle. Marty looked at the woman with mild interest. Why is she here?

Probably couldn't find a nanny and had to take the kid with her. Probably on their way home. Or maybe she *is* the nanny...

The woman put the bag on the floor, carefully, as if it was a precious collector's item, and crouched. Lips against thin blond hair, she murmured something to the back of the kid's head. With no response, she grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" she screamed.

The woman stood up and grabbed the bag with one hand (carefully) and the kid's arm with the other, and pulled, to no avail.

She looked up. "And this is what I get," she said to the branches that hung above, and pulled once more from the kid's arm. The kid started to cry.

"Oh, that now," said the woman. "Come on." She walked away, slowly dragging the kid behind her. Eventually out of sight, Marty could still hear the kid's cries for a while afterwards, the innocence and the smile fading with them in the distance, another sad whale song, another species doomed to extinction.

Marty sighed, looked down at his hat, darkness turned upside down and still empty after a morning's juggling. A reflection? Of what? Himself? The man on the bench caught his eye again, as he stood up indecisive, then sat back down. Marty frowned. What the hell?

The contrast of his white hair and his black clothes, a dark, unkempt raincoat setting the mood, made Marty feel as if it was raining. He decided that it was time for some fire.

Marty turned and looked at the lake, ducks sliding peacefully over it under the late morning sun, then looked again at the man, frozen in time. Maybe he was wondering why life couldn't be as simple as that. Just slide... Marty thought like that sometimes, and his life was simple enough. Simple-not-boring, rather than simple-not-worth-living, as he told himself a dozen times a day.

The torches were useless: the man didn't even notice them. Around Marty, the day picked up steam, lunch bags taken out on the grass, people trying to steal some peacefulness from the park and its creatures, getting ready for yet more hours of soul-crushing work, and later dinner, with someone or alone, brief mindless respite before going back to worrying about things such as lifestyle, or health insurance when real health was missing, or how to live through retirement when another retirement, this one of a more permanent sort, was ever-present, impossible to control or predict regardless of net worth and bank accounts. Somebody dropped something on the hat, Marty thanked absentmindedly without even looking. It might be trash, a torn restaurant check or a hundred dollar bill. You never knew.

Past one, the torches extinguished, Marty taking a break, the man finally stood up, more resolutely this time, and left. Marty followed him briefly with his eyes, shrugged, then went back to his sandwich.

"The end is near!" read one of the signs. "Jesus saves" read another, yet more yellow paper and curled-up corners. The would-be Preacher behind them in silence, his clothes a mess of plastic and uneven rags, watching people go by, cell phones, limousines poisoning the air, the corner of Fifth and 56th the center of broken reflections of the sun directly above, thinking how *right* he was, wondering how he could see things that others couldn't, thanking God for offering him a path to salvation. As a martyr, maybe. But saved in the end.

A suit stopped directly in front of him, the man's eyes deep blue, short hair a flare of pure white, clothes as dark as his soul. The Preacher thought about The Speech, his prepared sermon. Would this man listen? It didn't matter. He was about to get started when the man spoke.

"If you look up the word 'end' in the dictionary," he said into the Preacher's eyes, his voice cold, remote, "you will see that it means many things. Not just a finality, not just the point where something ceases to exist, but also the area that lies at the boundary, that which marks the extent of something."

A pause. The man went on. “A door in a sense... I looked it up this morning, and I was surprised at first. Then I realized that even semantics has been invaded by religion and all its fucked up concepts about the world.”

The Preacher was confused. A Messenger from God? But what was the Message? The man went on, “Now, what is the end to you? The crucial moment, where it all disappears? Or a beginning?”

The question hung in the air, as if sustained by the smog and the breathing of millions in the city. The Preacher was stunned, breathless. This was a sign. Had to be. The day had been full of them. From his police-interrupted daily cleansing (a term he used appropriately; cleaning would have required more than just scrubbing himself with filthy water) that morning in the fountain, to the young couple... Two teenagers that had listened to him, holding hands, giggling and murmuring, mouth to ear, hands covering the exchange, for half an hour before stealing one of his signs, the one that read “God is coming” after he refused to give it to them to put up at some party that night. A memento from the underworld to make the party more exciting, they’d said. And he was supposed to accept their shallow explanation, their open mockery of him? He refused flatly, and they got upset, thievery and laughs and running following shortly afterwards.

Am I just ... Just another lost soul in Manhattan? He’d always justified his behavior, his homelessness, as an expression of his devotion, his lack of need for things material. No job, no security, no money, living off the kindness of strangers. But now he was filled with doubt, thinking that maybe the kindness was not real, that there was simply a desire to keep him living so They could take a little revenge on the world, knowing that they’d helped him get through another day alive, so he could suffer the next one. Maybe...

The man in the suit looked up to a muffled noise on the Preacher’s back. The Preacher turned. The tree woke up suddenly, leaves rebelling against the stillness of the air. A moment later, birds burst out of the foliage in an explosion of sound and movement, and disappeared in the distance, over the park.

He looked back at the man, who looked back in turn, gravely, and whose face suddenly turned into a sick, cynic grin. The question was still there, a sharp knife ready to dive between unsuspecting shoulder blades, a weapon of force unlimited.

“It’s not a beginning,” the man answered finally. “There is nothing afterwards. No reward for your sufferings, no punishment. Nothing. Think about it.”

The man’s hands went to his pockets, and he left, losing himself in the sea of people and conflicts, walking south down Fifth Avenue.

The Preacher was left wondering, What now, oh God, what now. The signs fell to the floor, no force left to sustain them. A few minutes later followed them, collapsing silently, and started to cry.

Rachel could still remember the Golden Days, or what had been the Golden Days for her and her friends, back in the late 80's. Back when 42nd and 8th was a place of despair, an icon of decay and corruption, and they had all loved it as such. A place where you could get killed for ten dollars, true, but that was what made it interesting. Safety? Who needed it? Half of them had AIDS anyway. Leaving NYU (lack of money or lack of interest, she didn't even remember anymore, and it didn't matter really) had been hard, but it had a certain suddenness, a finality to it that somehow had made it bearable. Then the Descent, one concession at a time. And there had been some comfort in it, some path well defined that she could follow, step after step after countless of those of others before hers.

Then it began to fall apart, broken piece by piece and pushed out by "society people" and politicians, by grants and laws, by those who wanted to *clean the city*, as if the city was a floor that could be scrubbed, as if bleach or a chemical agent could erase behaviors and history. Ah. Not erase, but *hide*, pushed under the surface. Or outward, dispersing the darkness until it could be safely ignored. The invasion had been slow; day by day the rotten wood and faded plastic of run-down signs and shops slowly replaced by new doors and shiny images, until nothing from that past remained. Before that she thought she could take anything. But seeing it all slip away, sand between her fingers, one grain at a time, had been too much. Not even the fringes of society, people and things that had consciously stayed away from it, were safe. Eventually she had recovered, somewhat. But she had been broken once too often. Cynicism didn't even begin to define her outlook on things.

All her friends were gone. Dead, disappeared, or in jail. She was the only one left. 42nd was now another planet. Now, instead of porn theaters and pimps there was Starbucks and McDonald's. A new bookstore had opened last week on 42nd and 9th.

A fucking *bookstore*! What was the world coming to? Me working as a fucking video store clerk, that's what.

Fall in full bloom, winter waiting on its heels, eager to turn cold a city always praised for its warmth. *Warmth*. She sneered at the thought. Maybe it's warm for all those corporate types out there, those fucking bankers and such vermin, with their multi-million-dollar penthouses, their expensive whores and understanding wives, their overachieving children and happy endings. She thought that the image that fitted Manhattan best was that of a telescope mirror, where anything that was going on in your life was reflected and amplified, splintered into pieces and then put back together again by everything and everyone, a new level of meaning added to it.

The afternoon was giving way to the evening, the sun half-hiding behind skyscrapers and giant signs, penthouses and boardrooms getting the best and paying for it. She decided to take a break. Tom, that kid from the Upper West Side (who, she suspected, had looked

for a job this far from home so he could spend less time there), didn't even look at her as she left, announcing her destination, the nearest franchise coffee shop, and her return in fifteen minutes. She stepped outside and the thoughts came back. Was anybody happy here? In this city? In this planet?

Look at this guy, for example. Rachel's eyes on a man whose face didn't match his suit, head down, hands in pockets waiting for the traffic lights to change. Look at him. He isn't happy. Nice shoes. Pristine shirt. An expensive-looking overcoat that hadn't been washed in a million years the only element out of place. White, incredibly white (probably dyed) hair. Yeah, he has enough to want to pretend he doesn't have much. Still, one look at his face and you know, you *know*... And yet, does he do anything to change it? Does he care? Does he even *notice*? Suddenly the man looked up and their eyes met.

She stood still. His eyes were almost ... something else ... a feeling ... the moment held, the man's face frozen into an expression of pure *apathy*, Rachel felt as if everything around them had suddenly become a blur of colors and sounds with no meaning. And she got her answers. Yes, yes, and yes. She felt the determination, the single-mindedness, the *focus*.

A ghost.

His face disappeared, and she felt as if the world had been pulled from under her feet. It took her a few seconds to regain balance, and by then the traffic light had changed back into red, the man lost in the swarm of people across the street. She couldn't see him anymore, the crowd too effective in its disguise of individuals. She looked down at the ground, her eyes finally stopping at a nickel lying in a small puddle of dirty water. Why? Why do I feel like this? What *is* this?

Then the word came to her: Change.

But where to begin?

How about the shitty job. How about the dump where I live. How about...

Options piled up in her mind, but she was not confused. She went back into the video store, the words I Quit a neon sign drawn bright on her face. The image of the man followed her until she crossed the door, and then it disappeared, forgotten with all the other memories of her past life.

Outside the Garden there was this office creature, Ken, this set of habits with a pulse, patiently waiting for the light to turn green to cross the street, not yet on the other side and already dreading the moment he'd get into the subway. The sun had almost set by then, its only remains bloodstained reflections and memories of the heat of the day. Ken

was about to cross when he saw the man, his overcoat hovering in the wind, his body motionless, looking up at the sky. Ken caught himself in mid-step: white hair, young, sad face, blue eyes. Dresses well. I know this guy.

What to do? Ignore purposefully? Pretend he'd stumbled and wait until the man left? Greet him? He didn't even remember the name, and maybe he was wrong, what would he think...

Issues, he called them. Whether to tell someone or not that their radio was too loud, whether to get to the office fifteen minutes earlier to avoid being pressed against too many people in the elevator. Whether to take his coffee cup home when he left the office. Others called him obsessive, but he thought of himself as a perfectionist. Very few people were mature enough to understand what that meant these days. Everywhere you looked, the Message: the world was something waiting to be taken, something where things had only the place we assigned to them, and malleable as such. He didn't hate them. He felt sorry for them. He tried to make them understand, he tried to make them *see* how wrong they were, how much they could learn and grow if they would just let go ...

If they would just surrender.

Sometimes he thought exactly on those terms, as if life was a battle and he was the one in charge of the siege. As if others were fighting, too. As if he wasn't alone on the battlefield, sword cutting through empty air, shouts of rage disappearing into the night.

But it didn't happen. Somehow, others still wanted to play by their own rules. Eventually he ended up ignoring them, or trying to. When something was too much, he complained. But always with a smile. You've got to be friendly to people. Yes.

But this man...

From places unknown came the feeling that he *knew* the man. What could he say? What should he say? Suddenly the man looked at him and their eyes met, and Ken felt the fear. He considered his options. Should he avoid and smile? Should he just look away? Should he...

Ken didn't have time to react to the pain. A shout, a bike that crashed into him, and suddenly it was asphalt, teeth shattering, agony, dirt, and the headlights of an oncoming car, the screech and the smell of burned tires that turned infinite a final, ironic memory...

Inside apartment 454 of the Pearsons Tower in Battery Park, Angie was trying to sleep. She'd been trying for hours: Vodka, Valium, more Vodka, repeat. She felt sick, the highlight a throbbing headache that made the world spin with each small movement. And

Johnny hadn't come back with the package as he'd promised. Enough for the weekend. Nothing more, you understand.

She stood up from where she'd been lying on the floor for the past hour and walked to the window. Slowly. Carefully. She opened it and looked down, thoughts of an easy way out on her mind, when she heard the elevator bell. Johnny!

She ran to the door, her face lit up, a Christmas child. She opened, about to shout, but froze. Not Johnny. It was '455', a suit with money and an attitude that disgusted her. They'd barely exchanged words since he'd moved in last year. He looked at her while he searched his pockets, his face ashen, his strange white hair standing out against his dark clothes, his eyes somehow avoiding reflecting the light of the corridor. "Hi," she said, feeling uncertain. He ignored her, looked down at the keys in his hands, chose one, and opened the door. She was about to say something else when he disappeared inside his apartment, not saying a word. What the fuck? She thought of knocking on his door, of demanding a civilized answer, but then the pain came back, a thousand blades cutting through her forehead, and she collapsed on the floor. She finally crawled back inside the apartment and kicked the door shut behind her. She tried to stand up, but another wave of pain hit, and she fell down again.

"Please," she cried, her face wet with feverish tears.

The pain subsided for a moment.

"This has to end," she said out loud, but the room around her remained silent in judgment.

This has to end *now*.

She stood up. slowly, eyes fixed on the open window. If she could only make it...

Every step a nightmare, muscles cramped, heavy breathing.

Not far now.

Just... a little...

A cracking noise startled her, and she fell back on the floor. Her confusion grew. What was that? A gunshot? She concentrated, tried to think: where did it come from? The next apartment, it seemed. 455? A robbery? No way. The alternative didn't sound too plausible either, but somehow...

She felt better, less lonely; validated, maybe, by a noise that could be anything. She was trying to stand up again when the door opened, and Johnny walked in.

"Angie?" she heard. "Ang..."

She fell one final time, unconscious, a smile on her face, life again unbounded, as did the sun behind the horizon, searching for other beginnings.