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GREGORY LEANED INTO the new movement, toward the back of the bus, searching for a seat, finding one near her, then sitting. He recognized her from somewhere. She had shifted toward the window to make room for him, folding her newspaper in half. Did she live in his neighborhood? Where had he seen her? At the grocery store, in the café, standing in line for coffee, waiting to cross the street at Queen Anne and Galer.

Her fingernails were short, bitten close and painted purple. Her face seemed young, perhaps ten years younger than Gregory's. Her face was long and bright without makeup or adornment and he watched her too closely, thought he should look away, but continued anyway, then did glance away, then back, cutting his eyes toward her newspaper, then her hands, then her neck.

"Excuse me," he said, "I'm sorry for having to crowd you, but I get sick toward the back."

She didn't answer but seemed to draw away from him the slightest bit, squeezing herself tighter, making herself smaller, almost as if moving out of herself to move further away.

"Looking for a job?" he said.

She unfolded the newspaper, turned the page, heaved a sigh toward the front of the bus, then halved the newspaper again to make it manageably readable in her confined space. She did this all without so much as brushing against him.

“What do you do?” asked Gregory.

She glanced sharply in his direction, then back at her paper and said, “Whatever.”

He looked at what she looked at: the letter S. Sales, outside; Solid Co Needs Area Reps. International food company with growing monthly sales seeks area representative. Bnfts avail. Interview. Call Sam.

Watching the paper was making him sick. He looked toward the front window. “Where are you heading?” he said.

They bounced as the bus hit pot-holes, as it chucked over buckles in the road. “Church,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “I suppose . . .”

She looked at him, finally, and said, “Yes?”

“ . . . I was wrong. I thought you might be shopping today like the rest of us. It’s a big shopping day. They said so on the news. Thousands and thousands of people downtown, you know. So that’s where I’m going. Join the masses. Be with people.”

The bus brakes chirped. She looked out the window. He couldn’t help but give her a name. He thought of her as Sam. Absurd to give her that name. But he gave it to her, as if it was his duty to name her. It would be just as easy for him to say “What’s your name?” and then have the real thing. But he didn’t do it. He didn’t want to find out that her name wasn’t Sam.

Sam snapped the paper, pulling it out quickly by its edges. The bus stopped at the bottom of the hill and two people got on, a man and a woman, both tall and dark-haired and grinning. The rain did not seem to touch them. They were wet, but they seemed alive with the rain, more awake and aware than the rest of the bus. Gregory made a world for them, created lives for them, and sketched them in his mind:

They’re lovers. They’re happier than most. Happier than me. They have healthy hair because they brush it every morning and every evening, and they use

shampoo with herbal essence and conditioner. They made love this morning, then showered, together, and now they're going downtown. They'll spend the day downtown, drifting from department stores to the Pike Place Market, looking for a gift for Aunt Mary. They'll pick up knickknacks and hold them out to each other and say, "What do you think of this?" And the other will respond, "Oh, I like that. Do you suppose Mary would like that?" They laugh. Neither of them has an Aunt Mary. They create their own city. They've lived here long enough to call the city their own. But as they create their own city, the city in turn creates them, just as it creates the streets and the electric bus routes and the Thai restaurants and the coffee kiosks and the rest of the people here, right down to the man sitting in front of me, now speaking what sounds like Russian, now English, now gibberish. They belong to the city and if they leave, it will take them months, even years to find themselves again, to return to who they are. Their faces are reflected in the glass of the newest buildings. Inside her this morning they conceived a child and already it is there with them, downtown.

"Look at that," Gregory said. He was watching the lovers over his shoulder, trying to involve Sam in his fantasy. Sam held the edge of the paper, her hand floating near him, easy enough to touch if he dared. It seemed in this moment he could possess her — if only here and only in his mind — just as he possessed the fantasy of the two lovers. To actually touch and possess her was forbidden, of course, without her invitation, but this made him want to do it more than if she had allowed it, more than if she had encouraged it, and especially more than if she had begged for it (which was a second fantasy he was making space for in his mind at the very moment her hand hovered close to him). The exact distance between he and Sam seemed very complex, both near and far, both physical and psychological.

Gregory sat back in his seat again and patted his thighs as if deciding on something. "Do you live on Queen Anne?"

"Do I what?"

"I've seen you there. Don't you shop at Thriftway? I saw you buying flowers, I think. A big bunch of flowers. Months ago, of course. Lilies."

She didn't acknowledge his revelation.

"Who were they for?" he said.

"I don't remember." She looked at him, looked back at her paper, looked at him. "A friend's birthday."

“You live around here then?” He touched his forehead. He rubbed a spot that seemed oily and stung, the beginnings of a pimple there, a tiny but clamorous pain, like a pinprick. Doubtless she could see it. Perhaps she was repulsed by him, by his papery skin and pimply complexion, by the odor of his body (he should have showered before going out, should always shower even if he showered the night before, even if he showered just a few hours before and washed every inch of his body). He leaned forward in his seat, suddenly sick, hoping he wouldn’t vomit. It didn’t always help to sit in the front of the bus, especially when he didn’t look directly out the front window the whole time, especially when the weather was cold and rainy and he didn’t eat a good breakfast, just cereal and a Coke and leftover popcorn.

She still hadn’t answered him, so he tried again. “Do you live on the hill?”

“I live somewhere else.”

He turned again to find the lovers. They were smiling, talking in voices only they could hear. They quit talking. The man, seemingly distracted, watched out the window and smiled to himself, then glanced back at his lover. Her eyes were closed. *She wasn’t planning a pregnancy. She wasn’t even planning this man. He just sort of happened, the way things like this do. Where had she met him again? Somewhere she hardly ever noticed him, then eventually he introduced himself. He’d been watching her. He’d pursued her and captured her and now was watching her as she dozed for a moment. She was tired. Of course. She hadn’t had much sleep last night. They would nap this afternoon, after they got back to her place with the gifts and the wrapping paper and the cards and the groceries for this evening’s meal. They’d make love again and sleep, sweaty and warm under her goosedown comforter, soon to be parents, now presumably happy.*

The air smelled of Christmas—as it should—of evergreen and rain. Strings of lights blinked on and off in shop windows and on the bare twigs of hibernating trees and on the full branches of cut evergreens. The impulse to decorate seemed monumental, and few resisted the temptation to over-do it.

The hours of Sunday afternoon seemed to hover like the changing cloud fragments dismantling themselves, then reforming, passing slowly over Elliott Bay.

Gregory imagined himself at home, watching the rain from a chair near his window, watching the clouds and the fantastic silver light as it seemed to pause in his room. He wished for snow.

Someone on the bus was humming the tired rhythm of “Feliz Navidad,” a wretched bus rider caught on the pop refrain, unable to keep it from thrumming softly from her throat. The song spread throughout the bus, just enough of it to cause everyone aboard to wonder what it was that caused them to be thinking of that song.

“Are you a regular parishioner?” said Gregory.

She turned the folded paper over. “No,” she said. “It’s Advent.”

“Ah,” he said. “I love the music.”

She looked at him briefly, as if to remind herself who he was, to set him into her thoughts for a few minutes, to remember why she was ignoring him in the first place. Then she continued to read her paper.

Gregory kept his eyes forward and talked sideways to her so he wouldn’t get sick again. He was still spinning a little. “I have to buy a gift for my niece,” said Gregory. “That’s pretty much the only gift I give anymore. Parents are dead. My sister won’t accept gifts for herself. Gives ‘em all away, saying that’s not what it’s about. The gifts. She gives them to a shelter or something. But she doesn’t give her daughter’s gifts away. So I get to buy one thing and wrap it up. I wish I knew more about her so I could get the right thing.”

He tried to picture his niece but couldn’t. His image of her was from a photo taken at least three years ago — was she five in the photo or six? — and she was surely different now than the little girl he remembered.

“My sister lives in Colorado. Have you ever been to Colorado?”

“No,” said Sam. “I’m from New Mexico.”

“Does that mean you’ve never been to Colorado?”

“No.”

“I’ve never been to New Mexico,” said Gregory. “Is it very warm in New Mexico? Is it different there than here for Christmas? Do you get snow?”

“I’m not there now,” she said. “I’m here.”

Gregory put his hands in his lap. He was just about to give up. She didn’t want to hear about his niece or his sister in Colorado. She didn’t

want to talk to him, to look at him, to have anything to do with him. Who could blame her?

“Are you ever afraid,” he said, “that this is it? Life? I mean, it’s never going to be like you expect, is it?”

She looked up from her paper, but didn’t look at him. Instead she leaned her head against the window.

Gregory touched his forehead again. The pimple must be red by now. And he was practically pointing at it. It would be red and swollen by the time she looked at him again. He swept his bangs down over his forehead as if to cover it, but he was sure this only made his hair look ridiculous. He faced the front so that maybe she would never see it.

THE BUS STOPPED AGAIN and people shuffled off, then on, looking around for empty seats, folding umbrellas, yawning and leaning left, then leaning right, standing up on their toes, scanning the back of the bus, hoping to avoid sitting next to someone they didn’t know, hoping to avoid contact. A raincoat brushed against Gregory’s arm. He smiled upward but the person was behind him now. The riders settled in. The bus moved.

The man in front of him speaking gibberish was mostly silent, but once in awhile he’d speak in a burst of words making up what seemed a short, demanding, excited sentence: “Repulsion you, make stupendous, make-do, make!”

“I hope it will snow,” said Gregory. “I can’t remember the last time I was in the middle of a really good snowstorm. The weather guy said rain. Rain right up through Christmas. It seems like there was more snow when we were kids, you know? The weather is pretty messed up now, don’t you think?”

“Why don’t you just go to your sister’s house for Christmas,” said Sam. “Don’t they get a lot of snow in Colorado?”

She looked at him now with what seemed to be concern, with what seemed to be a genuinely perplexed attitude, as if she was almost interested in what he might do next but couldn’t figure out why.

“I don’t know,” said Gregory. “I guess I could do that.” He rubbed his hands together. The last time he had been to see his sister, she was still living in her Sea-Tac apartment, and she’d told him that they were

moving to Fort Collins, Colorado, that her ex-husband had decided he wanted a family after all, and they were going to go live with him. She was devout. She had to give it a try despite all Gregory's arguments, even his final argument which amounted to: "You can't go because you're the only friend I have." She laughed at that one, telling him that once she was gone he could get out from under the family rock. He could meet people. He'd have friends in no time.

But it hadn't turned out to be true. He spent most of his free time in his apartment, watching television or looking out the window or staring at a computer screen. At work he stayed close to his cubicle, close to his computer. He shut the world out, or he shut himself in. The difference seemed inconsequential. He sent three or four email messages a day to his sister, and she always replied briefly, saying something like: "Get a life, Greg"; or, "You sound lonely. Don't you ever go out? We miss you. There's a place for you here if you do ever come"; or more recently, "Mom and Dad aren't coming back, Greg, and nobody is going to replace them for you."

"I don't get along with my sister's husband," said Gregory. "It wouldn't work out."

"You don't get along with him? Christ, if my problems were only so tiny . . ."

She thrust her gaze out the window as if just realizing that she'd revealed too much to this stranger, that she'd have to stop now before he invited himself inside and made himself comfortable.

"I'm not a terrible person, you know," said Gregory.

"Nobody said you were." Still staring out the window. "What are you talking about anyway? Are you some pathological idiot or just a pathetic weirdo?"

He could no longer think, could no longer feel the vibrations of the bus, and only saw the buildings passing by outside. "I'm sorry. It's just, your hands, and you're very," he nearly stopped, but it was just going to stay this way, and she was going to leave him here alone, and he was never going to speak to her again, so what did it matter. "You're very beautiful. How am I supposed to say that? But I just did."

"Is this a line, then? Are you coming on to me? What am I supposed to do, fall at your feet and thank you for telling me I'm beautiful? Great. Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No, I . . ." and it was just as he thought. She was just as offended by him coming out and saying it as he thought she would be. She was offended not because it wasn't a compliment, but because it was a compliment coming from him, and he was offensive, he was pathetic, he was not beautiful himself.

She closed her eyes and said nothing for a few moments. The electric motor and the tires and the motion of the bus seemed a lullaby, putting them all to sleep. Then he heard the ringing of a Salvation Army bell. The bus driver called out the name of the next stop as they pulled away from this one.

"Third and Pine, The Bus Tunnel, The Bon Marché, Westlake Center." The driver's voice sounded slight, almost feminine, and he forced the words louder than they needed to be, and Gregory watched him, his face in the mirror above the driver's seat, and the driver caught his eye for a second and smiled.

"Forget it," said Sam.

He wanted to stop thinking of her as Sam now, but it was too late. She had become Sam, or Sam had become her.

"Please forget that I'm here," she said. "Forget about me. Just stop it and don't talk. Please. Don't talk anymore."

"Why? I didn't mean to upset you."

"Never mind. They're tears, okay? Don't look at me like you've never seen them before. God, what is that? I cry. Listen, you scare me. Not like you think. Not like I imagine you're some psycho or something. It's something else, okay?"

"Thanks," said Gregory, "That's comforting. I'm not a psycho."

"This is my stop," she said, looking out the window as if the bus had already stopped, as if she was just deciding to get out, as if maybe this was her stop but maybe it wasn't too. "Will you let me off?"

Gregory stood up and backed away so she could get up out of the seat, but she sat there for a moment as if reconsidering, just looking forward, waiting for the tears to stop, or just waiting.

"I'm sorry," said Gregory, hoping she would know what he was sorry for.

"I could easily make something up about myself to explain it all to you," she said. "I'm good at telling lies."

"No. It's okay."

"Have you ever just disappeared?" she said. She looked at him now, over her shoulder, watching him sway back and forth with the motion of the bus. "I mean, suddenly you don't know where you've gone, and then you sort of do, but it seems like the place you came from must have been very far away and a very long time ago, and you jolt awake, surprised, and you're ten miles off course, so you just keep going?"

He thought about what she'd said, but found her experience so unfamiliar that it became attractive, like matter seeking to fill up a vacuum. "I'm just the opposite," he said. "I'm always on course but never really going anywhere."

"No," she said, "I don't think that's what's happening." She stood. "Look, if you say you've seen me before, I believe you. But don't hope that you'll ever see me again." Her voice seemed to break off as if snapped in two, and Gregory thought she might stay there. Then she looked up, squinting into his eyes. "Don't follow me. Don't waste your time."

Should he try to comfort her somehow? Should he follow her off the bus? If he followed her, what would he do next? If he stayed on the bus, he knew what came next. He would get off at the next stop and walk to Pioneer Square. A longish walk in the rain. He would go to his favorite toy store like he originally intended. He would buy a gift for his niece and go home.

"Wait," said Gregory. "You forgot your gloves."

He picked up a pair of well-worn brown leather gloves from the seat. She had been sitting on them and they were flattened and warm. He held them out to her.

"They aren't mine," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I don't have any gloves."

He examined them. He rubbed the leather with his thumb and forefinger. "Well," he said. "If you don't have any, then you need some."

"They aren't mine," she said again. She shook her head and gripped the back of a seat to keep her balance.

“You need them,” he said. “Whoever lost them didn’t need them anymore. Look. It’s raining and cold. Would you leave a pair of gloves like this on a bus if you really needed them?” He smiled carefully and held the gloves out toward her. She continued to grip the back of the seat next to her, then leaned and reached sideways with her free hand, lifting her foot and adjusting her shoe.

“Okay,” she said. She took the gloves. She didn’t look at him. Their hands touched only slightly, only briefly, as if not actually touching at all. He wished for more. She turned away and clomped down the black plastic floor toward the front of the bus. She held on to the handrail as the bus came to a stop. She stood beside a woman with gray hair and a giant red shopping bag, smiling toward Sam once, then twice. Sam did not smile back. She did not seem to notice the woman sitting there.

Gregory sat again in the empty seat. The doors opened and the air and sound shushed into the bus as passengers took the steps down and out, then other passengers rushed in. It was still raining outside. Sam stepped onto the sidewalk and stopped. People walked around her. The driver lisped the next stop: “University, The Bus Tunnel, SAM.”

Sam? he thought. *The Seattle Art Museum.*

The bus began to pull away. He didn’t know her name. Someone tried to sit beside him but he pushed them away, standing, saying as he did so, “I’m sorry,” then yelling, “Driver stop! Driver, stop the bus!”

He went toward the front of the bus, still yelling.

“I can’t,” said the driver, “until the next scheduled stop. We’re in traffic here. Please stand behind the yellow line.”

“I’m having an anxiety attack, goddamn it, and if you don’t stop this fucking bus I’m going to puke in your lap!”

This was not entirely a lie, and the bus driver could see that, so he stopped the bus and let him off.

Gregory jumped from the step into the enormous puddle that seemed to be collecting all along the street. He shrugged his jacket up to cover his neck, then stepped up onto the curb, already searching. He ran back toward the Pine Street bus stop. His feet were wet, his hair was wet, and he could feel the frigid water creeping along his clothes as if making its way toward his heart.

HE STOOD AT PINE, kitty-corner from Westlake Center, the sidewalks and plaza full of people, even in this horrid rain, and he was trying to remember a church nearby. Might she have been lying to him? She told him not to look for her, not to expect to ever see her again. But the bus had only gone a block and a half. How far could she have gone?

A crowd of shoppers and unfortunate weekend workers huddled under the bus shelter. A group of Japanese men and women lined the outside wall of a parking garage for the slight shelter it provided, their backs to the wall, a few of them smoking, their shoulders raised against the rain and wind. They stood close together. They were a group, and Gregory envied them, their familiarity with one another, the way they could remove themselves from the larger crowd, apart from everyone, from the miserable people out there next to the curb, waiting. One of the Japanese men stood away from his group though, facing the group with his back turned toward Gregory, slicking his hair back over his scalp with the palm of his hand. He spoke to them in Japanese and took a step away from them, nearly bumping in to a woman in a red raincoat, apparently oblivious of her presence. They looked with longing down the street, hoping the next bus was theirs, perhaps, or that this man would shut up. They were tired of his instructions, of his constant yammering.

Carols drifted toward him from outside a department store across the street. He didn't mind the cold so much now and he didn't mind the wet. He felt as if a secret world was about to be revealed to him. All he had to do was seek it out and he would enter, warm and dry. The promise preserved him. He could see the carolers over there near a coffee shop. He watched them singing in the cold. They stood beneath a red portable awning, but it didn't seem to be protecting them much. They were at least as wet as Gregory, but slickered and capped so they would be protected beneath. They switched from one carol to the next. A bus pulled up, obstructing his view. Riders jumped from the bus and shuffled or ran or sprinted toward shelter. Some who had been waiting now jumbled outside the bus, waiting their turn to enter. The bus doors closed, then it moved off toward University, The Bus Tunnel, SAM. The Japanese group still stood against the parking garage, the one man still talking, now smoking, and he turned and looked at Gregory, smiled, and Gregory smiled back, and the man blew out smoke that was quickly lost in the rain.

A CROSS THE STREET HE SAW THEM. They were unmistakable, standing face to face near the carolers, people passing between here and there, obstructing his view of them, but it was them. *He wants to go home. It's too cold and too wet for shopping. This isn't fun. She wants to stay, to go into the coffee shop and drink espresso and eat bagels. She wants to buy something at Nordstrom. She's thinking of a chemise for herself, a necktie for him. She has tickets to The Nutcracker that he doesn't know about yet. She was just about to tell him about the tickets but now she doesn't want to. She wonders if she should go with him at all or if she should invite one of her girlfriends. She should let him go home by himself, but she doesn't want to be alone in the rain, with these strangers. She turns away from him, exasperated, and disappears into the coffee shop. He follows her inside.*

The crosswalk cleared as the sign turned to WALK. Gregory crossed toward the coffee shop, almost forgetting what he was looking for, thinking that perhaps he would follow them instead, catch a glimpse of their lives or even interrupt his way into it. It would be unlike him to do such a thing, and this is precisely why he thought he might do it today. Then, just outside the coffee shop, he found the gloves, tossed there beside the door. This was too easy and too fantastic and he knew it, the first thing he had known for certain in a very long time, and he stopped and picked up the gloves, stood and looked around at the people around him who never seemed to stop moving. But he recognized them. They arrived, they passed, and he recognized them. The great abundance of people were all looking for just the right something, someone, or somewhere. He stopped the next person who caught his eye, a woman in her late thirties, short and solid, loaded down with three shopping bags and a little boy hanging on her arm.

"Don't look any further," said Gregory. "You've already found it."

She looked dazed and tired, so he simplified his message. "This is it," he said. She shrugged and walked away, but his sense of revelation didn't diminish. He carried it with him and took it toward the door of the coffee shop, watching for those who could see it in him, how he had rendered all his doubts into their simplest form, how he could walk around for the moment without shame or pride or arrogance or self-doubt.

Gregory tried to remember what it was he had been looking for, but he couldn't imagine looking for anything. Except there they were in his hands. The gloves. Wet and worn and beautiful. He didn't know why he might have left them outside in the rain, but it didn't really matter.

He sat at a small table near the door and lay his gloves in front of him to dry while he ordered a coffee and a bagel and reached to the next table for the abandoned newspaper. He opened it up. It too was wet, but not so much that he couldn't read it. The coffee shop was steeped in a kind of steamy light, and as the coffee touched his lips, a drop of water fell from his forehead into his cup, so he brushed his hair to the side with his fingertips. How very wet the world could be, the rain fallen and puddled, absorbed and beaded up and running, rivulets filling up the streets, the rivers, the coffee shops. Gregory laughed out loud.