

## *Some Pigeons Can't Fly*

They argued the whole train ride home, standing near the rear of the car by the sliding door. It was a full car but Brook didn't seem to care that riders could hear them, which was unlike her.

She put her hands on Rene's shoulders and looked him in the eyes. It was her way of saying she loved him and wanted to work with him through this period of recovery, of *reintegration*. It was six weeks since he'd returned to the City from covering a warzone overseas. Rene shrugged her hands away and slightly inebriated said, "Why do you drag me out to these stupid get-togethers?"

"If it weren't for me," she said much louder, "you'd be rotting in front of the TV, making pretend your friends don't exist. Do you even want to be back?"

He felt tongue-tied and embarrassed as if he had somehow deceived her and the entire train knew he wanted to return to the Middle East.

"Promise me you're not thinking about leaving again," Brook said, as the wheels whistled around a curve.

"Who said anything about leaving?"

"I know the cease-fire's over. I have an i-Phone, I get updates."

She was right. Just a few hours ago during drinks he got a text from his editor asking him how soon he could be on a plane.

"*And?*"

"Don't play that cat-and-mouse game with me," said Brook.

A bearded man to Rene's left smiled at him and Rene stared up at the vents in the ceiling, feeling claustrophobic. Brook embarrassed him further: "And I thought you were a real New Yorker. Is it just not diverse enough? Not enough interesting people to profile? Are there no more surprises left here?"

Again Rene saw all of these critical eyes and lips; their silent scrutiny seemed to drill into his skin. "Don't tell me about being a New Yorker," he managed. "You're from Canton, Ohio, for God's sake."

"So by that logic, one has to be from here to be the *real deal*? Technically, you're not from here either. White Plains is north of the border." She looked exhausted, as their stop arrived. Rene couldn't wait to exit.

Ten minutes later they were back in their apartment. Rather than argue they ended up in bed with their clothes off, hugging and groping as if it was their last night on Earth, cancelling out the world, the forgettable train ride. It was the best love they'd made in months, a kind of make-up fuck—no talking, no exchanging of eternal vows —just the sounds of their hearts and heaves, their shadows dancing along the wall as if on a stage. They probed the familiar unknown and when their bodies untangled, they lay in a kind of sweet torpor, a cool, end-of-summer sweat. The red curtains came to life beside the beige Rothko which reminded Rene of the sand and Sari the musician. Rene hadn't heard from him since he left Sultan, and wondered if he was still alive.

"That was lovely," Brook said, dimming the light then finding his hand, clasping it.

"Mm." Rene returned to the scene when Sari played his most beautiful solo. It came a few days after an air raid that destroyed a whole block. Sari stood in a crater-filled park and played before a transfixed group of kids and parents. Rene could barely see anything because there was still dust in

the air. He managed to record the whole thing, spoke to Sari before and after, and posted the story that evening. The response was extraordinary, with readers from everywhere chiming in, many praising Rene's reporting.

"No, seriously." Brook peered into him. "That was special."

"It was," he said, the sound of cooing slipping in from the open window.

"I was in a lush field of rainstorms, sugar maples, and snowflakes."

Rene laughed. "That's why I love you... I don't know where I was. Probably in the sand... your silky sand."

Brook laughed with her finger in her mouth. "It's all about the sand with you."

"You love your giant snowflakes."

Brook gently scratched his arm. "I'm not judging you. Just observing."

"Well, what if part of me loves the sand, feels at home in a foreign land?"

"Then you stand to lose me and your life here as you know it."

"Is that a threat?"

"Nothing imminent. But the longer you're gone, the less this place will matter."

"What is *place* anymore? It's everywhere at once. Place is all in the click on your phone."

Brook laughed and playfully smacked his face. "You're not making any sense."

"The sand is beautiful, affordable. The war'll end soon."

“The war will never end. Or it will for a lull. And no, I’m not ready to go. Some of us still need to make regular appearances at the office.”

He wet his lips and was about to speak, then his phone buzzed.

“Don’t you wanna see who’s texting you after midnight?”

He’d lost track of time and forgot about his editor’s text: “I need your eyes and ears on the ground. Pay is good; all expenses provided. Let me know by 11 PM.”

Rene sat up and thumbed out the gunk in his eye. He knew what the new text likely said, and he felt as if he had to choose between Brook and the sand. But why couldn’t he have both? He had both, it seemed, until that last time he was detained by a rebel group suspicious of Westerners.

Rene slinked over to the window where the cooing was still coming from. “Damn pigeons.” He shut the window and stared at the fire escape.

“I don’t want you going back,” she said, as if she already knew the text message.

“I’ve changed, Brook,” he said, after a pause.

“I know you have,” she said. “But I can’t just wait around. I’m 32, you’re 37. Are we gonna be *partners* forever? Renting a one-bedroom apartment whose rent has nearly doubled since I moved in.”

He had no response to this. Brook passed out before long and Rene lay beside her, unable to fall asleep or decide. He remembered hanging out earlier that night with their old friends, at the chic bar in Midtown.

“It’s the age of the TV anti-hero,” Amir was saying out back on the patio.

“You love them and hate them at the same time,” his wife, Laura, said, and slurped her beer’s froth. They had all met in grad school a decade ago.

Brook sat beside Rene and said, “Rene and I don’t have a show to watch right now, do we, honey?”

“That’s too bad,” Amir said. “If you want any suggestions...there’s so many.”

Rene scrunched his lips and shook his head, unclear of what suggestions Amir meant.

“You would like *Dexter*,” Amir said to him. “He’s one of the most complex killers I’ve ever seen. And sexy, too.”

Laura bumped his elbow and Amir made an o with his lips. “Maybe that isn’t the right show for you. I wasn’t trying to be, you know, insensitive.”

Rene reclined and waved him off; old friends didn’t need to apologize about trifles.

“He still loves watching his Herzog documentaries,” Brook said as if to rub Rene a bit.

Amir laughed. “They never get old. Herzog the intrepid reporter of exotic mysteries.”

Laura looked at Rene and said in a slurry voice, “Is anyone home? It’s getting very lonely here without you.”

Brook broke down and started laughing, as did Amir. Rene managed to crack a smile and say, “I know what you’re all thinking about me. You’re all wrong.”

“Boo,” Brook said affectionately and put her arm around him. “Tell me what I can do.” Her eyes were bright and slightly red. “Anything you want, *mister man*.”

“Oh la-la,” Laura said and crisscrossed her palms as if asking to be handcuffed.

“I want you to fly with me overseas. See what I’ve seen,” Rene said.

Everyone stopped laughing; then the other couple started again. Brook gave him a tired look as if he had ruined the moment. She raised her martini glass and chugged the rest. Across the patio, a pigeon hopped on one leg along someone’s fire escape. It somehow made Rene feel older, more jaded, as if this was the apex of city living: expensive beer with friends in a trendy bar and the promise of a half-sloshed train ride home. It was stifling to think about his Sunday morning hangover, the new cupcake shop down the block, the loud brunch crowd gathering at the hipster cafe.

“So what’s next for you?” Amir said.

It was a loaded question and Rene settled on the generic: “We’ll see.”

“Didn’t you say you might want to teach?” Brook reminded him. “Renew your old license and write on the side?”

Rene yawned unintentionally then smiled. “And follow the same prescribed path that has ruined countless lives?”

“You still want to be like Herzog,” Amir said, dismissively. “Exploring the unknown, risking your life.”

Rene shook his head. “Is this coming from the same man who spent a week in a South Bronx crack house interviewing a celebrated poet?”

“That was years ago,” Amir said. “I’m not in my twenties anymore, and the Internet takes care of a lot of travel.”

Rene twisted his lip and thought, That was your last best piece, my friend. Nobody else wanted to venture into those crack houses.

“Herzog didn’t cover civil wars, last I heard,” Brook said, pouring herself another glass. “One where bombs are being dropped every day.”

Rene laughed again. “Since when did you all decide to become my mother? My best work’s been during the conflict.”

“Rene didn’t tell you this,” Brook inserted, “but he was imprisoned by rebels for over a week.”

“Eight days,” Rene protested and glimpsed the pigeon on the fire escape looking down on him. “And I was *detained*, not imprisoned.”

“What’s the difference?” Amir said, scratching his chin. “Were there not several armed men watching you at all hours?”

There were, but Rene wouldn’t admit it. “We were safer in that cell than in the streets at that time. Plus I was with other journalists.”

“Our government doesn’t pay ransom, you know that?” Amir said, arms crossed.

“Sometimes we pay.”

“You were imprisoned and didn’t tell us?” Laura said, sounding offended.

“When I got back,” Rene defended, “I didn’t want to think about it.”

“Why do you need to risk *everything*?” Brook said.

Rene was about to respond, but Laura cut in: “There’s so many great stories in the City.”

“It’s all the same,” Rene said. “The same New York heartbreak; the same artists who need to relocate or reconfigure their rat-traps.”

The table quieted. Brook pinched Rene’s elbow and looked lovingly at him as if to calm him. He could stare for days into those little blue orbs and admire her reddish curls and light freckles. Rene then felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and he quickly checked the message. It was from his editor, and marked URGENT. He looked up and noticed that Brook’s eyes had widened, as if she could read the text message blazoned on Rene’s forehead. “Let’s go,” she said, nearly dragging him from his seat. “Thanks for coming out, Amir. Laura.”

Amir put his hands up and Laura stared open-mouthed while Rene shrugged and said, “Sorry for being such a bad sport. I’ll make it up to you guys.”

“Let’s do shit,” Amir said. “Go to the Film Forum. See something Czech or Chinese. Like old times.”

“We will.” Rene pointed at him.

“See you lovelies soon,” Laura said.

Brook blew them a kiss with eyes closed.

Next day Rene rode in a cab, gazing through the window at the ugly highway. He wore a light coat over a plaid shirt and a black skullcap. His satchel, soft with age, hung around his shoulder like a natural extension. Within its pockets were his Fuji 9000, his lithium batteries, his pads and pens, a laptop, and American-Sultanese dictionary. His helmet and padded vest were tucked in his suitcase.



Brook stared at the pebbly ground outside when the dark car arrived a half hour earlier. Something had shifted between them like a kidney stone. Rene looked up at their apartment window. “Be back soon, I promise. Three weeks. Less.”

“Email me every day,” she said, holding his collar in her hands. “Every other day at least. And don’t forget your friends.”

Rene stretched his arms across the back seat and breathed deeply. *Put her out for now. Put everyone out.* That was the beauty of working in a warzone—nothing else mattered but your safe house and contacts. The whizzing sound of the cab, the low hum of stereo, fingers pattering on the wheel. The scruffy-neck driver said, “Where you flying to, my friend?”

“The Middle East,” Rene replied after a pause, spotting some jumbo jets in the distance. “To Arelia, and then Sultan.”

“Huh. Interesting times to go.”

“It’s not really for pleasure.”

The driver observed him through his mirror. They drove to the terminal without speaking and Rene was almost free of New York. When they parked at the curb, he saw a pigeon near the revolving door. It just stood there staring at Rene with its unblinking eye. He imagined it could hear him think. *Something holding you back, little guy?*

Rene counted the fare and said, “Some pigeons can’t fly, you know.”

The driver scratched his silvery cheek then broke into laughter. “If they have at least one leg, they can fly.”

“No,” Rene said, “even with one leg they’re still stuck.”

The driver counted his fair and said, “I don’t mind being stuck.”

Rene opened up the door. “You’re probably better off.”