

The Ties That Bind

The old man sits beneath the courthouse steps and weaves bands of colour.

Around him the city moves, its people leaves of well-dressed detritus. They blow past him in their hundreds. Men in fitted suits, short hair on sides and long on top, big voices, big gestures and a constant paranoid glance. Pencil-skirted women whose heels tick-tap across the ground, bright as birds of paradise and just as calculated in their beauty. Visitors in fashionably-torn shorts and name-brand singlets, stark for their indifference, pointing at buildings, laughing, their conversation light and cheap. The police in their vests and uniforms, weapons forgotten and holstered, who level him suspicious glares as they pass to testimony and back.

The old man sees it all, and none of it.

He is a weathered, wizened old creature. Hooked nose, bald crown, skin like sandalwood. He wears the same brown raincoat every day, long past his knees, its cuffs and tail in tatters, the colour indistinguishable, assimilated with years of stains and dirt. He cares little for its condition, notices less beyond his work, the patterned knots his calloused hands weave from coloured plastic strands. They are pretty, barely; the type of thing you might hang from the zipper of your bag if it was made by your beloved child. But these were not. They belong to a silent, leather-dyed outsider, his back hunched perilously beneath his coat, his thin neck jutting lower than his spine. Oddly broad, lumpy and alien; a bleary-eyed vulture who has forgotten how to fly.

His world is a three-block radius and his life is a three-spoked wheel. There is the making of the coloured braids, the brightly knotted plastic, friendship bracelets or boondoggles to some, whatever they're called. There is the selling of the coloured bands, a process which involves no more advertisement or persuasion than standing on a corner and holding the creations aloft until a guilty-cashed passerby takes pity on his condition or effort or time. Then, finally, there is the writing – the recording of endless notes in cramped, illegible scrawl-code, pages and pages of A4 notebooks stored in his nest for indeterminate purpose and time. This, above all, is most important; it is, he is certain, the only thing standing between him and certain doom.

The Ties That Bind

Morning comes, the rivers of rush hour. The old man sits at the mouth of the tunnel, the train station exit, weaving with barely a suspicious glance. Completed bracelets dangle from his shopping bag, the invitation unspoken and ever-present; few pay it heed, his wares and presence a fixture for the dailies. Eventually, one of them stops – a young man, handsome and respectable, dark hair and straight teeth. Indistinguishable from the rest.

“Hello there,” the stranger says, “I’m Hassan.” A pause. No response. The stranger points to the knotted bands. “What’re you making? Can I buy one? How much?”

The old man shrugs. Such questions are irrelevant – he’ll only limit himself by answering. Surely enough, after a moment of silence the stranger hands him ten dollars in exchange for a single braid. The money leaves the stranger’s felt coat and enters the old man’s tattered one without incident or thanks.

“Well then,” smiles the stranger, pocketing the knotted plastic, “I’ll be seeing you. Have a good day.”

The old man says nothing, his eyes already returned to his work.

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A vermillion sunrise today, auspicious, full of meaning. The old man takes careful note of it in his minute handwriting, the cheap BIC scratching hieroglyphs barely distinguishable as words. There’s an answer here, he’s certain; essential, unspoken. The back of his neck prickles and he can feel it – he’s the only one who knows the truth. The only one safe to tell.

It’s a warm day outside, even in the courthouse shadow. The old man peers intently at the people passing by, suspicious of their intentions, seeing instinctually where they fit. After an hour there are fewer of them and he relaxes, if only slightly – shuffles to the convenience store, trades a coin for a cup of coffee. The staff know not to hassle him; he is a human hedgehog, harmless when no one interferes. The other customers pass him nervous looks, but the old man doesn’t notice. This is just how people look at him these days.

Afternoon, and the day’s patterns are recorded. His hands turn to weaving, and as the city exhales its workforce he’s approached by a familiar face. The stranger, the same one from yesterday, greeting over at him with a nod and a smile. He hands him another ten dollars as he passes, without even wanting a bracelet in return, and the old man receives it without

The Ties That Bind

worry or complaint – some of them are just like that. He waits until the human tides have receded and wanders to the supermarket for a mandarin and a bag of crisps.

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Grey skies and battering rain, and the man sits well in cover. There's a wool jumper beneath his jacket, and the city rarely gets truly cold. Today is a day for weaving and watching – far too dangerous to write, though he lets none of his trepidation show. They're somehow more dangerous in the rain, he knows; it's counterintuitive. The clouds cast shadows, blocking the connection to the sky. He keeps his eyes focussed on his work. The more they know he knows, the more danger he'll be in.

Less people today but the stranger still comes. He brings with him a second cup of coffee, which the old man accepts without thanks. The froth trickles bitter and creamy down his throat. This is, as they say, the good stuff.

The stranger stops to chat a while, asking polite questions, saying pleasant nothing. The old man does not respond, merely continues weaving, his shoulders hunched and his eyes downcast. Their conversation lapses into silence. The stranger's dark eyes gaze at him, though the old man barely feels their touch. He's watching for far more dangerous things than this one, this regular kindly pawn. The stranger stands beside the old man's seat for a while longer, then trades him more money for another band. The transaction is background noise, a distraction – the old man's eyes flick warily by. The stranger leaves, and his absence is barely felt.

Grey rain brings opaque tidings.

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Overcast today, but with patches of blue spackled through the white. That's good, the old man knows as his eyes follow a police van. Three tourists have already stopped to buy braids from him this morning. Serendipity. A ventilation day.

The stranger comes by and stops to talk to him, as is his fashion now, their routine. The old man doesn't mind. He's harmless, this one; always smiling, always kind. There is an inherent fidelity to him, a familiarity, an ease. He sometimes asks what the old man is writing, but he doesn't want to burden the stranger with such knowledge – better to keep those ill-fated auspices to himself. He feels protective of him, in a strange way; this

The Ties That Bind

kind-voiced stranger with his neat felt coat and combed black hair. So little he knows, so little he understands, yet he remains optimistic, as the old man once was, long ago, before his mind grew warm with knowing.

Before. A far distant memory, long banished from the old man's mind. He remembers pieces, the important pieces, the ones he gathered together and knotted into a single vibrant braid. The rest? It seems so irrelevant. He repulses, magnetically, from examining it. Grey and blurry fragments of a life devoid of meaning, from before he descended into truth. It's faded now, the thoughts of it, as withered and hunched as he is. Yet he can't quite shake the feeling that maybe there's something still in there. Maybe there's something he missed.

"I'll see you tomorrow," says the stranger, seeing his eyes turn distant. The old man just grunts, his hands no longer moving as he swims in greywater memory, wading through ink-scratched thought.

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"Why don't you come and stay at my place?"

Five days of rain now, dull winter, and reluctantly the stranger's suggestion has some merit. Even beneath his many layers the old man can feel the chill's taunt tendrils snaking their way through holes and seams. The sandwich in his hand is as good as any, another gift from the stranger, arrived like clockwork. It is not the kindness that concerns him, nor the unfamiliarity – he picked this place merely for its conjunction, a thoroughfare with stoops and shops and shelter. It's the twists of destiny he's worried about; what if fate requires him to be here? But the patterns of cars driving past declare no certain duty-hold, and the rain is apathetic in its bite. He lets the stranger have a small and silent nod, and the young man goes to bring round his station wagon. The old man loads his bags into the back and shuffles into the passenger seat. They're off. They drive in soft warm silence out of the city and into wide suburbia, between pale faced houses and weeping trees.

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The stranger's home is kindly, as the old man expected it to be. A picket fence around a small garden, azalea bushes and apricot trees. A two-car garage and three steps to a doormat, then inside and into a narrow hallway trimmed with stairs. The stranger leads him along the floorboards and up into a bathroom, where he provides a hot shower and fresh clothes while the old man's own are washed. The weaver accepts it all with equanimity, taking it like he

would a coffee or apple or spare coin. He steps naked into the standing tub, the hot water unnerving in its pleantry, yet he scrubs with rigour and with practice. There is much to be cleaned and muscle memory to draw upon, even if it's too distant to remember when it was forgotten. The old man emerges from the shower fresh and unaffected, and dries himself on the towel the stranger left behind.

They share a meal together, just the two of them in the stranger's dining room. Geometric patterned plates rest atop a thin white tablecloth, their colours warmed by amber lights. The meal is hot and hearty, roast lamb and jewelled rice and chickpeas, the old man's favourite, now that he remembers. He picks at it with satisfaction, pleased with the situation inside and out. Cold water too, then hot tea. He sips it, his mind drifting while the young stranger talks.

There is a bed made up for him, an empty, quiet room of soft white sheets and moonlight. He climbs into it and turns to sleep without hesitation, unthreatened by the strangeness or the change – there is comfort and there is warmth, and it has been many, many years since his life was last his own. Maybe it will be some time before they think to look here; maybe, as the stranger suggests, he might just stay a while.

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It is pleasant days that follow, whispering raindrops and buttermilk sunrise. The old man sits a lot now, claims a leather recliner in the stranger's study, his fingers still braiding coloured knots – force of habit perhaps, for he has no present need of money. The stranger provides him meals and cares for him, gives him tea and blankets and light, empty books and un-holed socks. He says things too, the stranger, many things, warm words that slip easily through the old man's mind. He talks of places and of people – of other strangers and their distant lives. The old man knows them not, but neither does he mind.

Then comes an odd day. The stranger calls the old man by a name, a kind name that he hasn't heard in many ages; a name that catches in the old man's throat, though he can't remember why. A strand of recognition flits, a syllable sitting not quite right – floating around him like a dandelion, slipping through his grasp. He thinks of consulting his journals but can't remember where he might have put it. This strange, familiar word. Sad; or bad; or Dad.

One of those.

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The Ties That Bind

The night is blue and moonless when the old man awakes and knows it's time to go. The realisation isn't dramatic but it's certain; as tight and sure as knotted metal, a calm encircling rope. He gathers his things in patient silence and re-dons his tattered coat – the pockets full of braided plastic, the familiar weight of knots. His footsteps make barely a sound as he treads down the stairs, across the hallway to the door. He passes a picture, a photograph, the old man and the stranger, both younger and both smiling, hanging waiting on the wall. Taken long ago perhaps, but it swirls the old man's suspicions and coats them solid around his heart.

He leaves without word or notice, stepping out into the sleeping streets, the silent starlit sky. The old man shuffles ever onward, his shoulders hunched, his eyes down, never looking up or looking behind. Somehow, he knows where he's going. Somehow, this is what he must do.

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The old man sits beneath the courthouse steps and weaves bands of colour. The city moves around him, its people going about their lives. Businessmen and women, children and tourists, police in their uniforms and barristers in their robes. Some glance at him and some ignore him and the old man sees and disregards it all. He is a weathered, wizened creature, a fixture between the flotsam, and his tattered brown raincoat is the same today as it ever was. His hands weave patterned knots from coloured plastic strands, the type oft made by children, and his back hunches higher than his eyes.

Morning spreads, the flow of rush hour. The old man sits at the mouth of the train tunnel, weaving without a glance as the faceless people pass him by. Eventually, one of them stops – a young man, handsome and respectable, dark hair and straight teeth. Indistinguishable from the rest.

“Hello there,” he says. The old man glances up at him and sees a small, sad smile. “I'm Hassan.”