A Kind of Adventure

Have you ever played the ‘What would you do in this situation’ game? Well, we had, my family that is. House fire, terrorist attack, zombie apocalypse, we were prepared. But lost in NYC, not so much. It was quite simple really, how I’d ended up here: I’d been pushed on the train by the pressure of the crowd; they, my parents, had not. I got off at the next stop … and waited … and waited … and waited some more, bitter and teenage angsty, but still hoping that my parents would come and find me. We’d get a falafel and laugh about how badly it could have gone, meanwhile they’d feel all the more appreciative of my ever pleasant company and I’d internally judge them on their lacking parenting skills. I’d ultimately have a good story to tell and everything would be as it should. That didn’t happen. I went back to West 4th station, hoping that they’d been waiting for me the way I had for them. Holding in my breath and forcing down the anxiety attack, I stepped off the train and onto the platform.

It was clean, unexpectedly so, and while I’m all for cleanliness, it just didn’t fit. Subways are supposed to be dirty, to show the signs of all the people who’ve used them as a means of getting to where they want to be. It was strange, off putting, especially considering how dark it was, not just in the tunnels but the platform and hallways that led even deeper into the underground. The entire station was dimly lit, full of shadows that seemed to be clinging to the walls and crawling out from the corners. I looked around, my eyes brushing over the people standing by; the hairy guy, at the end of the platform humming a vaguely recognisable Christmas tune, the bald man with the thin lips, looking down longingly at the tracks. It took no time to realise that my parents weren’t there and the few people who were, weren’t the kind I wanted to be alone with in the dark. I thought back to second grade and the day friendly officer Gus had visited our class and shown us the educational video on ‘*Stranger-Danger’*. I was pretty sure this qualified as an unsafe situation and the guy on the bench in the trench coat, with the twitchy eye that looked like a Death Eater Neo-Nazi did not strike me as a reliable adult. So I did what every self-proclaimed “Big Kid” who also has a blue belt, *not to brag,* should. I assessed my surroundings; weighed the pros and cons of staying where I was; made a plan of action and then followed through, feeling like a less Scottish more out of shape Brave Heart, I booked it up the stairs, down the hall and kept running through the asthma attack, under the heart palpitations and over leg cramp until the safety of the exit and daylight were in view.

I stared through the glass at the world outside and was not impressed. It was desolate; there were no taxis, no people and no McDonald’s anywhere in sight. *No McDonald’s*. Word to the wise, if you’re somewhere in North America and there isn’t a McDonald’s within a three kilometer radius you shouldn’t be there because clearly no one else is. I was lost and I was alone. Manhattan’s subway system is huge, but the city itself is bigger and the least sketchy person I could find was this homeless man. He was on the bench outside the station. His image flickering through the revolving doors like an old Charlie Chaplin movie, every movement he made jagged and surreal. I shivered as I stepped through, walking towards him. Average height but easily three hundred pounds he was huge, not like a body builder but like a homeless Santa Clause, all tummy and white beard. Body facing the street, his back was hunched, head down, focused on the ‘Sunrise Mart’ shopping cart, parked in front of him.

“Excuse me?” his head jerked up, surprise written deep into the lines surrounding shiny black eyes. I got the impression random teenagers didn’t talk to him very often.

“Sorry, I’m trying to find a pay phone… or a police station, someplace where I could make a call?”

“Are you ok?” His voice was deep, the kind of low you usually only hear briefly from the cracking throats of pubescent boys. He didn’t have an accent that I could tell. I’ll admit I was slightly disappointed, I’d imagined a strong Brooklyn, maybe a lisp… probably both. But no, it was even, smooth. Like Morgan Freeman he had the kind of voice you want to hear narrate your life, just because it has the power to make even the most mundane of moments feel riveting.

“Ah, yah I’m fine, I just-“

“Your lost.” Not a question.

“Well, ah…yah-No…. Yes, I am definitely lost” No point trying hide it.

“You wanna use my cell?”

He must have seen the surprise on my face but he wasn’t offended, instead it was the first time I heard him laugh. It started with his eyes and reverberated throughout his whole body. His mouth spread open, his shoulders rocking, belly bouncing I swear to god there was a few ‘*ho’* s.

“Ho-ho hold on…” And so it began.

The shopping cart. It was a dull silver, it had clearly lived a long life and seen many things, full to the brim, if you really needed it, it was in there, but my god, just because he had it does not mean that he was quick to find it.

He unloaded it piece by piece: crock-pot, dress pants, harmonica and so on. Finally surrounded byat least thirty National Geographics and a spilled mason jar full of identical Lenny Kravitz buttons, he made a noise of extremely satisfied triumph, brandishing a square, duct-taped, purple Nokia that looked like it had gone to hell and back again.

“Here” he said grinning broadly as he tossed it to me from inside his cage of stuff, immediately beginning to reload everything back into the cart.

“Thanks” I coughed out resentfully, tripping over a golden desk lamp and a cat carrier as I lunged for the shitty piece of plastic that could reunite me with my parents. *No wonder the duct-tape…*

I flipped it open, punching in the number, manically humming to the tune of the dial code I’d heard as long as I could remember, my entire sanity resting on the success of this call…and… and… and nothing. It didn’t ring, it didn’t go to voicemail it just… nothing.

I cried. A lot. Snotty and hiccupping, my hands were trembling sporadically, my right eye as twitchy as the subway Neo Nazi.

And then for a moment everything seemed to stop. I stood, waiting to calm down, to understand what I was supposed to do next, or maybe for that little bit of courage that heroes always seem to find in themselves just when they need it. It’s supposed to hit you. My dad always says that stories are like instruction manuals, they show you what to prepare for and what to expect, and every dystopia, adventure and supernatural love triangle I’d ever read made it clear that one minute you were scared shitless and the next courage had made a home in your heart like it’d always been there. Well I guess my courage was chilling out with my parents right now because like them it was nowhere to be found. So I did what I always did when something was wrong: I referred to the great philosopher SpongeBob and the rainbow power of imagination and pretended things weren’t as bad as they really were. Sucking in the deep breath my mom seemed to think could cure anything I looked up to find the homeless guy looking at me intently.

“It, um, didn’t go through, but thanks anyway.” I said, handing him the phone. He nodded in understanding.

“It does that sometimes,” He mumbled apologetically, his fingers drumming distractingly on the handle of the shopping cart.

“ So what are you going to do now?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I said, my voice starting to tremble. I looked around desperately taking in the grungy toy store to my left, the bared window of the jewellery store to my right and the never ending labyrinth of concrete buildings that seem to go on infinitely on all sides.

“I don’t know….”

“There’s a firehouse a mile or so from here…” he said pointing vaguely at some point over yonder. “I could take you to it, it shouldn’t take too long, but it’s a little tricky to find on you own if you’ve never been there before. My name’s George by the way, just George”

“I’m Nicky, and –“ I hesitated. I didn’t know him, George. I didn’t know anything about him except he had been nice to me and was a bit of a hoarder, *because really why do you need a cat carrier if you don’t have a cat.* At the same time I couldn’t see what choice I had, I had no money, no phone, no way of getting out of there other than putting my trust in him.

“I’m Nicky, and it would be great if you could walk me to the fire station… thank you.”

“Awww don’t worry about it, it’s nothing, nothing at all, it’s just over thataway…” he rumbled, already pushing the shopping cart out from behind the bench.

We walked for a long time, talking quietly, about this and that; sunshine mart-*a Japanese foods store where he liked to buy his rice wine (2.49 a bottle),* the cat carrier I had nearly died tripping over-*he didn’t have a cat now but he’d like to at some point,* and so on.But the farther we went the more distracted and the less talkative he became. We went along main streets and over bridges but “a mile or so” turned into an hour, the streets became alleys and our surroundings became more and more rundown.

“George, are we almost there?” I was surprised by my voice, it was quiet, and timid in a way I wasn’t used to.

He didn’t answer, just kept walking, one step at a time, stopping occasionally to pick up a penny or an interesting pebble.

“George, we’ve been walking for a really long time, where are we? Are we almost at the fire station?” Nothing.

“George?”

We turned around a corner and then crossed to the south side of the street, George was struggling to work the cart onto the sidewalk. Getting more and more frustrated, he pulled it back, slamming it over and over again against the curb. The metal of the shopping cart screaming as its body was beaten against the concrete.

“Shit.”

I flinched

” Shit! Shit! Shit!”

He was screaming now.

I covered my ears like a six year old trying to block out a parents’ argument-

“George, stop!”

*I shouldn’t have said that.*

The shopping cart forgotten, he turned to me, eyes blazing mad, he grabbed my arms and with the same force as the cart, slammed me against the wall, my head cracking against the bricks.

“DO NOT TELL ME WHAT TO DO!!!”

They say that eyes are the windows to the soul, maybe, but I think it’s the other way around, they’re more like a TV or a pair fancy Google glasses that play the mini series of your life; when you pass out, the TV’s still on but you’ve lost the connection, all you feel is grey and static. When you die the plugs been pulled, there’s nothing but black. And so my world faded as the suit tune of moon dance, purple and gold sailed me away on the river Styx, until the sweet lips of a blue-eyed prince pulled me from my slumber –

No, I’m lying, that’s complete bull; the moon dance and the lips bit at least. I did actually pass out but instead of the sweet princy lips that I’d hoped for, I got an undiagnosed concussion, a minor heart attack and the terror of being woken up by George, the homeless Santa in a stained red tracksuit making sure he hadn’t killed me. On a side note, thank God there were no lips, because I assure you, maintaining pleasant breath was not one of George’s priorities. As I registered what was happening I’ll admit I went bat shit; I punched crotches and kicked kneecaps and spear fingered eyeballs*.* And my god did I scream: a full-fledged holler of bloody murder, rape, kidnapping and child marriage, I would die 60 years old with 30 children and George would be my Stockholm Syndromed baby daddy and-

-And my elbow connected with something.

Hard.

There was no noise, nothing holding me, keeping me trapped.

And so I ran.

I saw a pet store, an antique shop, a curry place, a public school, a gentlemen’s club, a thrift store, a pregnant woman. I didn’t know where I was going, I couldn’t remember the way I’d come, but I knew I was going to get away, I knew as long as I kept running eventually I’d get home.

I think almost everybody, at some point in their life, has wanted something so desperately that their life feels incomplete or insubstantial without it. It could be to walk on the moon and look down at the earth and see something most people will only ever imagine, or it could be to play in the NBA, be Miami Heat’s Number 27, look up at the crowds night after night and know that there are thousands who are looking up to you. But those are both maybes, so unlikely that the question is entirely *if*. For me, it had nothing to do with *if* and entirely to do with *when*. Not when I’d go to the moon or join the NBA, I don’t like heights and to say and I’m vertically challenged is an understatement. No, for me the question was when I’d have an adventure; and not the get lost at the bay and chat with a perfume salesman who used to play the trombone for Ray Charles sort of adventure, because I’d been there before and I’d done that. The kind of adventure I was waiting for was the kind that takes you to the fires of Mordor, through the wardrobe, into the forbidden forest and back home to camp Half-Blood. That was the kind of adventure I wanted and like most things you wish for it didn’t happen in the way I expected. That’s not to say I regretted it or reversely that I enjoyed it, I just mean that there was no fairy god mother to help me along, only George and his shopping cart of infinite possibilities.

*2496 Words*