Segue

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J.M.

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**The Gambler**

*To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go,*

*To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts,*

*To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you,*

*To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.*

—Walt Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*, 13

When it got so I didn’t know which route to take through the city anymore, only going one way hoping to see you, and the other to avoid hope, when it got so every head in the street was yours before it turned, when every movement outside a café window made me jump, and when at last I let them cut my phone off because I was nauseated every time it rang, I went to a travel agent and sat at her desk feeling grateful. It was the first time in a long while I had felt anything for anyone other than you. She smiled, overcharging me exorbitantly, and two days later I stepped into a city crowded with your absence.

I’d worked from nine to six those last days, riding down toward Notre Dame afterwards with no reason, until I saw the cathedral, and the closer I got, the better the light on the façade was. They’d finished cleaning it, and the sun went down over the river and I sat thinking, nothing in Paris is real, but at least with the cathedral they did it right and perfectly. Perfectly fake angels, perfectly fake demons, perfectly fake kings in perfectly scrubbed limestone, electrified to keep the pigeons from shitting on their perfectly fake faces. You and I had watched a show about how they electrified the heads of the kings on the portals.

In quarters where youth is everywhere in the streets, it’s easy to find beauty. That was ruin to me. After knowing you, I knew the men in the street were carefully constructed images, and the more careless they looked the more care they had used. I’d pass a boy on the sidewalk who looked a little like you, and could tell by the cut of his hair how long he primped in the morning, and had the knowing feeling that if I woke up beside him, his gestures would either be so calculatedly uncaring that it would annoy me, or else his turnings and caresses would ignite in myself that same fire of uncaring. No one is innocent in Paris. I will qualify that—or strengthen it, I’m not sure which—nothing is simple in Paris. Because Paris is memories, and memories are rarely simple. I will qualify that further—memories are rarely honest.

In this new city, buses sounded different. Menus were different. Coffee cups were bigger. People had different haircuts and clothes. There were less of those moments where my brain surged suddenly as a head turned on the sidewalk. For a while, I moved through this new city blind and deaf, as there was nothing to remind me of you.

Then one night, a man in a bar started talking. At first I didn’t turn my head to look, afraid I might hate him once I saw his eyes weren’t yours. But I listened to his voice, and later followed him outside, and then we were in a truck with a breeze coming through the open cab, rolling across a bridge with the lights of the city below us.
“I don’t think you want to do that,” he said, when I touched him, and that was how I knew. He was sick like you.

In the morning, for the first time in months, I knew where I was. Before I opened my eyes, it seemed you were beside me on one side of the bed, and he was on the other. “It’s my birthday,” he said.

I took him to a restaurant and had the waitress put a candle in his dessert. We got coffee and read about his stocks. On rainy days, we went to museums. We spent hours in a deep naugahide booth by the fireplace at the House of Chan. We raided convenience stores for Grape Bubble Yum at midnight, made love in the shower, climbed on his roof, watched the sunrise with his cat. He would drive me to work in the mornings. Before I got out, he would push his head to my chest as if I was something he could hide inside.

I deleted his emails systematically, with a pang of regret, to keep myself ready. I had never meant to stay in this city. Soon it was time to leave it.

Last days are always either hard or not. It started in an Italian restaurant. I was not looking at him to avoid crying. I watched his confusion sink from dumb hope to something more like embarrassment. Then we were searching for truths—we wanted everything out on the table. We were stretching the bounds of our subject, walking up and down the streets of Gastown in the rain. What he explained of himself seemed strange stories I knew, but had never heard. What I said sounded equally strange to him—he hardly listened, hardly knew what to make of it. We tried to explain ourselves, but it wasn’t the moment for explaining. The only moment it could be was the moment for platitudes. And so we reached the point of saying nothing. Later he would remember what I said and wonder at some unknown part of me that would already have changed by the time he remembered it. That’s how truth is, out of context.

“It’s not goodbye,” he said at the airport.

“No,” I said.

Whatever he saw when he looked at me, he would see it for a long time. He wrote to say he was painting the corner I used to write in, when he suddenly broke down crying. “Suddenly, just at noon, I was sure I had lost you,” he said. I counted the hours to verify his intuition, tabulating the exact moment he had. He sold his house and came to this city where your face no longer haunted other faces in the street. He wanted to travel, so we flew to another place, then to another, taking buses and ships, until we came to a sea rich in ruins.

A road wound to a city now disappeared, a weedy field. We climbed the top of the theatre and around the halls of a roofless stone bath. The more expensive bus companies were safer. But the cheap ones were faster. When the bus broke down, everyone got out to watch the driver repair the engine, somewhere with cliffs, a castle, and cave houses. The traditional greeting for tourists was “where are you from?”—street vendors and hawkers were everywhere, so you answered the question every ten feet as you walked. We had taken to saying “from hell,” but then they wanted to know where that was. We walked through a necropolis, swam in a radioactive Roman thermal bath in our underwear. He lost the guidebook and we wandered through countrysides where we didn’t speak the language, taking pictures of each other in ruins. A Russian shepherd led us through the hills. At Priene, with its pine needles, I hiked up the hill and found him alone at the temple of Demeter, crouched by the pit where the offerings were thrown. The fields below the ruined city were on fire. A dull blur of yellow lit the tall grass, like light through a sea-washed bottle.
There were cities of every sort: flooded cities, dried up cities, earthquake cities, burned cities, trampled cities. In Aphrodisias, the temple was closed. You could stay in the historic part of the hotel, the owner said, or you could stay in the part with electricity. We took the historic part and a few extra blankets, applying Oscar Wilde’s advice for drinking absinthe at the restaurant: After one glass, you see things as you want them to be. After two, you see them as you don’t. After three you see them as they are, which is the worst of all. A man at the next table told us a story: A woman is promised to a man, comes home to see her father before they are married and is blinded, then goes back and marries him. We stepped out under the sky into the silence of the town.

“Is it you?” wrote a voice from long ago.

“Where are you?” I asked.

When I had your answer, I walked up the hill to the citadel and sat on my bags watching the sun set over the cliffs of the old city. The air was full of little gusts of the cheap fuel they burn here in the narrow pink streets. Children were flying kites as the sun moved across the hills. I put him on a bus, stood watching the snowflakes fly in the headlights. He sat close to the window, watching me. “Those last days together,” he wrote, “I was sure you had met someone else.”

The highway to the airport goes through a gaping hole in the Byzantine wall. On the other side of the sea, I checked into a hotel and waited. It had been raining. The wallpaper showed dark patches. Above the mattress, the sun shone through the marble windowsill, and I thought of Venetians polishing a sheet of alabaster so thin you could use it for church windows.
Author Notes

J.M. Parker is a researcher in narrative theory at the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Paris, and teaches as an Assistant Professor at a private university in Istanbul. He is currently working on a series of interlocking short stories, of which “The Gambler” is one, as well as a nonfiction volume on the image of foreign cities in American literature. His fiction has appeared in Frank, Gertrude, Harrington Fiction Quarterly and other journals.

About the Work

The material for this story comes from a period when I was taking a lot of notes about things that were happening around me—when a single phrase to describe some one event often shot through my head very clearly and got jotted down and stored – in many different computer files and notebooks that I carried around or worked on. We live so many narrative threads in our lives simultaneously: how to disentangle them? I trusted chronology to solve part of the problem. But chronology alone wasn’t enough. I decided to group my notes around characters.

So this story was supposed to be a portrait—one of a series of portraits that would ultimately fit together to tell a longer story. As I worked, I realized no single person one meets in life can really have his story amputated from all the others. I try. But, as someone who once read other of the stories from this collection said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if all the people you wrote about were just one person?” In a way, in fiction and in life, I believe they are. Don’t we, after all, in moments of laziness, or in moments of clarity, live the same story over and over with different people? This is partly what “The Gambler” is about, and this is why the characters in stories I write are so amorphous and so hard to pin down and tend to run over into each other.

People tell me when I explain a situation aloud I explain all the unnecessary details, leave out the most important parts, and finally neglect to say what I actually mean by telling it at all. There are gaps in this story. Leaving them there, not trying to break beyond the surface of the moments I recorded was one of the hardest parts of writing this piece. I trust the details themselves, the little moments of understanding, of fixation on an object, of a fleeting glimpse recorded on the spot, more than I could ever trust any sense one can pull out of them. One can pull any sense one likes out of an experience or a set of experiences to suit what one wants to see at the moment, and that bothers me, because the sense we make of things changes over time, and perhaps sense should change over time – the sense we make of our lives needs to be malleable in order for us to survive and develop and move on. And yet I like to think that these little moments of seeing are valuable in themselves and of themselves, just as they were. I like to hope that, even as our sense of our lives and their events changes, these little moments might remain fixed, pinned to the table like formaldehyde exhibits, protected from interpretation. That they not be fiddled with or have the dust scratched from their wings in all the moving around that we do with the events of our lives, in our minds, over a lifetime, to make sense of them, for the practical purposes we find for them. Like stones making a castle, I don’t mind if you lay them down and build on them, cement them together, bury them under a structure that rises… as long as you don’t chisel them, don’t fit them together so that they are fused together forever. I like the idea that if the whole thing were taken
apart again, each stone, round river rock or chardy broken bit, could have the cement rubbed gently off and sit in your hands, exactly as it was before it became a part of any structure.

Of course this is nonsense, because I do edit, a lot (I tend toward long sentences, with paraphrases that simply will not do—or, no, it’s not even that: I don’t tend toward sentences at all. If left alone on the planet with a pen and notebook, I’m sure I’d never use another sentence again). Editing is necessary, but I always feel like I’m running a delicate balance between making it legible and killing it. And I take enormously long breaks between rewritings (years).

They say the point of fiction is “making strange.” But if truth is stranger than fiction, then isn’t fiction the banalization of life? I often think writing follows the basic rule of French cooking: take something fresh, do something to it, then do something else to it. That’s art. But life was always better.

J.M. Parker on the Web

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