

A WALK DOWNTOWN

Jerry Harper was worrying, and he was quite right to do so. It was going to be a bad day, no question about that.

First, he was soon to receive a savage tooth cleaning at the hands of his dentist, a sadist who delighted in inflicting pain upon his submissive victims, and who had the effrontery to demand money for the privilege. Second, he had left his law firm an hour earlier than he should have, and that meant burning an hour's billing time unnecessarily. He hoped the boss wouldn't find out, because there was nothing worse than watching that strange bump emerging from his boss's forehead when he was truly angry. Third, because he was early, he was waiting in a "convenience" store, one of the many in Washington, D.C. It was a cramped place, but unique in offering its patrons somewhere to sit, a very long shelf pressed up against the broad front window, with a few unsteady metallic chairs to sit on, provided you clamber onto one of them without falling off.

Sitting there on his ungainly perch, morosely stirring his tepid coffee, Jerry fell into an ever deepening gloom as he brooded upon the violence soon to be done to him by the masked and goggled dentist waiting to do him pain. Finding it unbearable, he pulled out his Iphone and started playing on baseball games; so lost was he in the bleak midnight of his reverie that he lost all sense of time until something stirred within him - that he might be late.

"Oh, God! Not again!" he cried out loudly, pulling hard on the sleeve of his suit and looking wildly at his watch, remembering the last time he was late, and how the dentist had met him at the door, pointing at the huge clock like one of the monks in the

the Middle Ages.. Oh, but this time he was all right! His Tommy Bahama watch told him it was nine twenty! Scads of time remained until ten o'clock. But then, his face darkened - there were doubts – was his watch correct, or was it criminally slow? He'd better check it out with someone to be sure. He looked around for someone to ask, and found, just three open chairs away on his right hand, two young women, whose startled expressions suggested that they had apparently witnessed his outcry to the heavens.

“Hi!” Jerry called to them with a diffident smile. “Do you happen to have the time? My watch says nine-twenty, but I’m not sure it’s right.”

The dark haired girl, furthest of the two, leaned back from her taller friend and glanced quickly at her watch. “Yes,” she said brusquely, raising her dark eyes suspiciously to his. “That’s about right. Nine-twenty two, give or take.” That she seemed to have taken a dislike to Jerry didn’t surprise him. Women often reacted very strongly to him in a physical way: they either suspected that he was coming on to them and resented it, or they hopefully believed that this was the hot guy they had been waiting for to dump their boy friend.

But Jerry was anything but a demon lover. He was a dutiful husband who both loved his wife and feared her, the perfect combination of a happy, durable marriage. But he couldn’t help his dark, striking good looks with something of the pirate in his smile, made even more emphatic by his lean, muscled body – largely a gift from his construction worker father. In fact, Jerry suspected that he had got the job in a high powered litigating firm partly because his boss thought Jerry’s powerful physical presence embodied the personality within, an assumption that Jerry feared had undergone substantial erosion in the last few months as his nervous character became increasingly

apparent. His boss had started to avoid him, to drop his eyes as he passed him in the corridor. Not good signs, he figured.

Putting these troublesome thoughts aside, Jerry noticed that the two women sitting near him were still engaged in their whispered conversation and quick glances in his direction. “Don’t be silly, Karen”, Jerry heard the tall girl say as she squeezed her friend’s forearm reassuringly ,and turned to speak to him.

“ You sounded really upset,” she said solicitously. “Are you going to be all right? Do you need to call someone?”

Jerry was at first irritated by her, thinking that he would have to deal with another woman who wanted to start a conversation with him. But her soft eyes were so thoughtful and concerned for him that he knew he needn’t worry about it. “Thanks, but I’m fine,” he replied gratefully. “I thought I was going to be late for the dentist. And if I don’t get there, they charge me. Like gang busters.”

The dark haired girl, who was listening impatiently, suddenly leaned over to her friend and said in a flat, toneless voice, “We should be going, Julia.”

“Right away, I promise.” Julia offered her an appeasing smile and turned again to Jerry. “This is my friend, Karen, we work in the same company. I’m on leave of absence now.” She went on eagerly, raising her slender arms to her hair and smoothing it down nervously. “I know what it’s like to have to be on time. I have to go to the doctor this morning, and can’t be late.”

“No kidding!” Jerry said. “Both of us! I have to go through hell at these cleanings. I hope you’re not going to have anything like that.” He scowled darkly as he thought about it.

“I don’t like going to the dentist either. Whoooo!” she said, trembling slightly at the thought. “Those things hurt, don’t they?”

“Yep,” Jerry said, rousing himself, ready to talk about himself. “They can have you bouncing off the wall.” She nodded sympathetically. There was a pause. He looked at her, only now beginning to see her. She couldn’t be more than twenty two or three; she was tall and slender, and her full lips and grey eyes reflected the kindness with which she first spoke to him. She was very appealing, like any young woman who was carefree and happy to meet the day. He sighed inwardly; if only he had her youth and security. But as he gazed wistfully at her, there was something about her that moved him. It was the sadness of her grey eyes; they were like windows at which she stood watching a grey rain falling heavily outside and denying her the afternoon’s play which she had so looked forward to.

“Your doctor,” he asked, with hesitation, “is it going to hurt there too?”

Momentarily her eyes widened; naked and terrible they flashed to his, and then withdrew just as quickly under the shelter of her long lashes. “Yes, it does hurt, in different ways,” she said, shrugging her fine shoulders with apparent unconcern. She paused, glancing aside at the customers crowding against the counter, and then leaning forward to Jerry so as not to be overheard, she told him. “I have cancer. I have to get chemo, and it isn’t always nice.”

Jerry was appalled; and he had been wailing shamelessly to her about a trivial dental cleaning! “Hey”, he said, searching for an apology, “I’m sorry about harping on the dentist...”

“Oh, but it’s not like the dentist,” she said, hurrying to comfort him, “with those sharp instruments and electric things.” But he knew that chemo is a pretty bad treatment. Just then, there was a buzzing sound like a petulant house fly that caused her friend Karen to fumble distractedly in her hand bag for her cell phone.

“Julia!” Karen said brusquely, stuffing the phone back into her bag after a brief tense exchange, “I have to go back to the office. They want to have a meeting – another panicky meeting – about the project right away. They’re sitting there now, waiting for me, the dumbbrains. It’ll take me at least a half hour to get there. So I can’t take you.”

Julia’s face went ashen. “Oh,” she said, for a moment anguished and incredulous. “You can’t?” But then, recovering herself, she managed what might have been thought a smile, even the pretense of a breezy one. “But that’s all right,” she said, “I can take a taxi. I’ll be fine.”

“No, you won’t,” Karen said firmly. “Look what happened last time.” She turned to speak directly to Jerry, her coal black eyes trained upon him like cannon about to batter down any resistance. “Would you walk Julia over to the doctor’s? If someone doesn’t take her there, she won’t go.”

“What?” cried Julia, shocked. “We can’t ask...”

Jerry’s first impulse was one of alarm and an urgent need to bolt out of there right away. “I’ll be late,” he interposed. “The dentist’ll charge me; They’re vipers. And if they make me sit and wait for the next available chair, my boss will be looking for me and he’ll really be ticked off.” He cleared his throat and looked regretfully at the women, who were watching him narrowly. “Sorry,” he said, “I have to get to my appointment.”

“You see?” said Julia urgently to her friend, her voice beginning to rise with tension. “He can’t. And we don’t even know him.”

“What time is your dental appointment? Karen demanded, fixing her eyes steadily on him.

“Ten o’clock” he muttered.

“It’s only nine-thirty five now. Julia’s doctor is at twenty second and K street. You can do it in fifteen minutes each way,” she persisted. “Where’s your dentist’s office?”

He reluctantly gave her the address. “I’ll be fifteen minutes late,” he said defiantly. “And they’ll cancel me.”

“Bullshit.” Karen snapped.

“Please stop!” Julia suddenly implored them. “You’re making me feel awful.” She slipped quickly from her chair and hurriedly pulled her handbag over her shoulder. “I’m not an invalid,” she said to both of them, her eyes brimming with tears. “Not yet.” She started with determination for the door, her shoulders hunched, her chin pulled down in a futile effort to shield her tearful face.

“You creep !” Karen hissed at Jerry. For a long moment they gazed hating each other. Then Karen clumsily gathered up bag and briefcase, jumped on her short legs to the floor and went rushing outside, calling “Julia!”

He sat there at the window after they’d gone, while the image of Julia sobbing in the street rose before him. The shame of it brought a deep flush to his face. How could he have turned that girl away like that? Fortunately she would have Karen to accompany her; her running after Julia made that pretty clear. But that was no absolution

for him. He went to the counter for another cup of coffee, and sat down once again at the window, to consider bitterly what he had become. He thought about his college days, remembering his friends, so many friends! who used to think of him as a really decent, easy going guy, who would never do something as ignoble as this. They would not know him now. Sighing, he fell into a blank, morose gloom, silent and cold. When suddenly, unbidden, it came to him.

And that revelation was that Karen may have yielded and taken Julia to the doctor's; or, she might have taken another, so a pretty quick look should resolve that. So, he'd take a couple of blocks, and then hustle over to the dentist! When he hurried outside into the warmth of the day, he stopped for a moment to decide what course Julia might have taken. Assuming that she had not taken a cab, the only plausible route to the doctor's office in K Street was along a few blocks downtown, thus avoiding heavy traffic and difficult crossings.

Following that reasoning, the route led Jerry quickly through two or three streets of quiet townhouses until he turned into a broad commercial avenue, which in its turn would lead to K Street. He did not have much hope that he'd see her again; so when at first he thought he had briefly glimpsed her within the restless crowd, he wasn't sure that it was Julia after all. But a bit closer and his heart leaped. He could clearly see her green print dress and her light blonde hair shimmering in the brilliant day. She was talking animatedly with a street vendor who was selling sunglasses under an enormous yellow and blue umbrella. She was putting on a funky pair of fire red glasses and laughing at something the vendor had said when Jerry came up.

"Those look great on you," Jerry said.

She turned suddenly to see him, her finger tips still holding the glasses to her eyes experimentally. “Oh, hi!” she said, flustered. “It’s you!” She lowered the glasses quickly and looked at him with a questioning smile. “What happened to the dentist?”

“I thought about it,” Jerry replied, “and figured that it was either him or a walk with a beautiful girl, and it was no contest.”

She flushed briefly with satisfaction and rolled her eyes upward. “If that was your choice,” she said, chiding him gently, “you should have known it a lot sooner than you did. “

“I know,” he acknowledged, “but I’m a slow thinker.”

She paused, looking thoughtfully down at the glasses dangling from her hand.

“They’re too wild for me now, the way things are”, she murmured, and returned them to the vendor with thanks and a few dollars for his time. Then she stepped closer to Jerry.

“Is it time to go?” she asked plaintively, looking at him with her sad grey eyes.

“If you say it is,” he responded gently.

She came to his side and slipped her arm under his, as his daughter sometimes did. With a gentle pressure from her, they moved off. “I don’t even know your name”, she said, and after he told her she burst out laughing, informing him that “Karen told me you might still come for me, and that you were so good looking, that I’ll forget all my troubles along the way. ”

“Then that would be the first good thing they ever did for me,” he told her, surprising her with its latent bitterness.

“Oh come on,” she said, reproachfully nudging him. “You’re married, aren’t you; do you have any children?”

“Yes, one, a girl.” He wouldn’t burden her with his own fate, that his wife was desperately concerned about his imminent discharge from the firm, and was struggling to find a job for herself, though she had not worked since their daughter was born eleven years ago. “You see the good things you have?” Julia was saying triumphantly. “And your wife must have liked how good looking you are. It has to start that way.” He nodded to agree with her. “Yes,” he said, “you’re right.” She affectionately squeezed his arm. “I know I’m right.” They went on past Connecticut Avenue with its gleaming shops, but not having the time to stop to look in, and turned up twentieth street, still arm in arm, prompting the passers by to look with a smile tinged with melancholy at the lovely couple, and to draw from some women a frown of disapproval at the striking older man with the face of a pirate who had obviously taken advantage of a pretty young girl.

They went on toward L Street, at the same casual but steady pace, at one time having to evade a woman swinging a briefcase who rushed heedlessly at them, her glowing blonde hair flaring in the mild breeze. “Doesn’t she have beautiful hair,” Julia said wistfully, turning to admire the woman as she hurried down the street. “They don’t wear hats now. That’s too bad.” She looked back at him with those grey eyes which Jerry thought sad but recognized now, as she gazed steadily at him, that they were not only sad but that they were also indomitable.

“With chemo I would lose my hair, Jerry.” They were still walking, and she told him this as though it were merely a point of information, something he might be interested in knowing.

“But don’t they have hats and other things that look pretty good?” he stammered, his mouth having gone suddenly dry.

“Yes,” she said, “after a time”, smiling fondly at him the way one smiles at a child. “But that’s not really the point.”

They had now reached K Street, the frenetic heart of the commerce of Washington, where at some point down its pulsating avenue, Julia’s doctor kept his office. They were no longer talking, just moving on, in the regular pace they had learned was suitable to both of them, when she squeezed his arm fiercely, and they stopped. They had arrived. The doctor’s building was like so many others built in the 1980’s: low in structure, made of dark brick as though it were anxious to seek anonymity. A deep portico cast a profound shadow across a double door, capable of receiving not only those who can enter the building under their own power but also those who arrived in wheelchairs or ambulance.

He waited with her there, silently gazing at the door. He couldn’t say how long, feeling her breath rise and fall against his body. And then he felt her arm slowly withdraw from his, slipping from him, and then she let him go. He turned to her quizzically.

“I’m not going in, Jerry,” she said softly, backing a step or two away from him. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“What?” He bent his head questioningly toward her as though he didn’t hear her, but of course he had. “You’re not going?”

“I’m not going to do it. I’ve made up my mind,” she repeated firmly.

He was startled and unnerved. “But it’s your chance!” he babbled.

“There isn’t any chance,” she said, shaking her head wearily, her hair spangled with sunlight as it drifted across her face. “It’s terminal. And it’s a very bad type of cancer- the pancreas.”

“But they’re trying...” He made a vague gesture at the door. “There has to be a chance.”

“They try,” she acknowledged calmly, “but it’s hopeless, they said so; maybe they could give me a few more months. That’s all.”

He was horrified; he didn’t know what to do. He swayed slightly, like a boxer having taken a heavy blow. He was about to mouth something more when she came suddenly up to him and putting her arms around him, laid her head against his shoulder. “I already knew just after we started out that I wasn’t going to do it”, she murmured, nuzzling deeper into his shoulder. “I was going to tell you then, but there I was, walking downtown with a guy who was so nice and so good looking who could have been my boyfriend or even my fiancé, and I didn’t know if I would ever have that chance again, so I thought, just a few more steps, and I’ll tell him. But you were so nice and felt so good, that I didn’t want to stop.” She paused and held him for a bit longer, then lifted her head from his shoulder and looked into his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He felt numb; the things he said and did afterward were not strictly his own, but were dictated to him by some impulse clear and calm, deep within his consciousness. "I'm sorry we had to stop," he whispered to her. He kissed her cheek, fresh and warm. "Let's do this again," he added. "We can take another walk."

"I don't know," she said, parting from him, glowing shyly from his kiss. "I'd love that. If I'm feeling all right." She paused, looking archly at him. "If your wife won't mind."

"Sharon?" he said with surprise, thinking of his honest, good natured spouse. "I'm sure she won't mind," he said. "She'll want you to come to dinner." He reached behind him, pulled out his wallet and gave her his business card. "That's my home number; you can call me there if I'm not working at the firm anymore." He watched her as she carefully inserted the card into her handbag and then remembered to ask her if she would give him her number.

She didn't reply immediately, but reflected upon it, thoughtfully nibbling at her underlip. "I'll call you, Jerry, I promise." So sweet was her smile that it was plain to him that she would never call because she would not be able to. "Is that okay?" she asked.

"Sure it is. Whatever you think best." There was a pause.

"I should go home now," she said.

He couldn't speak.

"Well...goodbye, good looking," she said, with a choked laughter. "Thank you, Jerry." She kissed him quickly on the cheek, and then turned, head high, and started off.

“See you soon!” he called, and watched her turn back and wave, and turn again into the crowd to be soon lost among it.

For some time after she left, he remained fixed in the place by the door where he had last spoken to her until he was able to move again. Finally, he started walking, hands plunged in his pockets, thinking of her. She knew, that pretty girl in her early twenties, that the ample portion of this life owed to everyone was not to be hers. She knew that, and yet she was not going to deny it by maintaining a grotesque and painful charade of living until the end came.

It seemed to him that if Julia could confront her own fearful destiny so boldly, then perhaps he could do the same on the mundane scale of his own life. Until now, he had refused, had lived in dread, to even conceive the possibility that he was not a capable attorney. He had told himself that his problems were due to his aberrant character, like his failure to appear on time, that caused his firm’s disenchantment, but certainly not because of any defect in his competence. But he knew secretly, waking at night as though there were terrors scratching at the window, that he had failed abysmally. The years were brutally making that known to him, in the form of the disdain of colleagues, the denial of bonuses, the mediocre cases assigned to him, and the worst of it all, the dismay of clients, the awful sense that someone had relied upon him and that he had let him down. And then the night fears, the bad dreams. And his bizarre failures to arrive in time – he was running away from the intolerable. It was clear now.

He had now reached the compact little store where he had first met Julia, and he halted for a while looking through the window remembering where they had met.

All right, he nodded, as if she were sitting across from him. He would tell Sharon that he would no longer seek an attorney's job if he were laid off. He would do something else, perhaps teach in high school, but something that would give him more time with his daughter. They wouldn't have much money, but they would manage together, he was sure. They would find a way.

He waved to her in the window and went on his way.

END