

DAYDREAMS AND OTHER USELESS FANCIES

"...under the Hyksos a feudal system had broken up the old patriarchal social structure as it..." Sara paused and closed the book and gazed out the finger-smudged window to change the focus of her wandering thoughts. Absently, she had re-read the same sentence over numerous times, recognizing words as they sped past her vision but lacked the will of concentration to link them together into a thought. As she stared at the blank window of the commuter train, she mused to herself, "I should place marks in the margin for each time I re-read the same sentence, like notches on a bedpost."

The train emerged from the tunnel like a snake seeking the warmth of sunlight, and Sara blinked at the sudden change of light. Though the train ride to her job was a daily routine, she never prepared herself for that split second of change from the darkness of the tunnel to the glaring brightness of daylight. It was the instantaneous shock of sudden change, perhaps, that made things feel more alive, and she preferred the surprise of it—if knowing something's coming in advance can be considered a surprise. But, it was not paying attention to precisely when it would happen that made it a surprise.

Outside, the neighborhoods of houses, and the business centers of long, low buildings, and the traffic lights and the telephone poles whizzing by reminded her of the words on the pages of the closed book, now lying helpless on her lap. She glanced down at the book. Since she had started reading it about three months ago, she had managed to cover about forty of the 320 pages. "It really isn't a terribly interesting book, so why..."

Her thoughts meandered mid-sentence. From the top of her field of vision, she was aware for the first time of the anonymous people sitting around her. This morning she had taken a window seat which faced directly across from two other seats. It was the only open seat in the normally crowded train. She hadn't concerned herself with who was sitting around her, till now. Sometimes people, when in a crowd, inspire a non-presence. They wish to be anonymous from others as they gather themselves for another day at work. So, they avoid looks in an attempt to insulate the air immediately surrounding themselves hoping others won't violate their space. Like the others, Sara liked her solitude. These were, after all, just so many never-to-be-seen-again faces embarking and disembarking continuously, day after day. Who could be concerned with striking up a conversation with someone you'd see for ten or fifteen minutes—then be gone. There was no point to it.

However, this morning Sara was finding herself irresistibly pulled into the space occupied by the passenger seated across from her. She resisted looking up directly at the passenger's face. So, she let her eyes drift from her book, down to the floor, then over to the feet of this passenger. It was a man—yes, she could tell by the shoes... and the cuffs on the pants. Women's pants don't usually have a cuff, at least, not in current fashions. Nearly all the passengers were office workers and managerial-types on their way to work, so their fashionable attire reflected their professional occupations. The cordovan-colored shoes of this rider were definitely masculine—large and wide—and with the type of pattern punched in the leather which distinguished them as wingtips. "Funny name," she thought. "Sounds like the shoes are going to take flight. Maybe this is the 20th century's version of Apollo-wannabe's."

The grey wool pants were neatly pressed, with a crease running like a razor's edge down the center. The shoes were clean and polished. Sara became increasingly more curious about the owner of the Apollo shoes and crisp pants, but still hesitated to lift her gaze. She didn't want to be caught looking at him. Doing that would invite someone to violate her own space. So, her vision again drifted casually out the window of the train. She caught her own vague reflection in the window glass. She was mildly pleased with the vision. She knew she was considered attractive, but needed an occasional assurance. But like a fan sucking a feather into its blades, she was drawn to see the rest of the person with the neatly pressed pants and polished shoes.

Like a disciplined soldier she paced herself, imagining an acceptable interval of time which would be appropriate to change her gaze slowly from outside to back inside the moving train. Trying to appear nonchalant, she shifted her eyes upwards—as if daydreaming—turning her head in a manner one does when the head follows the motion of the eyes. Searching for something to rest her gaze upon that was close to the subject's head, her eyes alighted on a poster. It was one of those dull advertisements printed on faded blue paper and posted on the walls of commuter trains and buses; something about how alcohol and drug dependent people can get help at "So-and-so" Medical Center.

Once she comprehended the nature of the ad, she was anxious to move her gaze elsewhere. If one lingers too long on such an ad, others will think you are attempting to memorize the phone number so you can call as soon as you disembark the train. Feeling a spot of heat rush to her cheeks, she shot her eyes from the ad to his face to the ad again in record time. Although it was almost too fast to catch any significant information about the owner of the face, except that there was a pair of eyes looking back at her own.

"Can you believe that? He was looking at me!" Sara exclaimed to herself, more embarrassed than irritated. "So now what do I do? I certainly can't pretend that I didn't do a hit-and-run look at him. And I'm not even sure if he's worth the risk to look at a second time." She shifted nervously and fingered her book, playing with the edges of the pages.

Remembering the neatly pressed pants and polished wingtips, she grasped the book with a strangle hold, sucked in a quantity of air that made her nostrils flare open, she serenely turned her head, caught his eyes still watching her, and she smiled innocently. Mr. Apollo was already smiling at her when she turned to look at him. It was a closed-lipped smile, but the corners of his eyes were wrinkled like he was well-acquainted with the act of smiling. Sara was pleased to see that his face was also neatly pressed and polished. His auburn hair was wavy, but sleek and smooth. The only hair on his face was a pair of full, dark eyebrows and long, dark dewy eyelashes. There was no trace of hair below the eyes. Just smooth, olive skin setting off eyes the color of dark-green moss.

Sara quickly glanced at his hands. No wedding ring. But she noted a Wall Street Journal neatly folded on his lap. She could tell that he had been reading it because of the extra fold down the center length-wise, the way serious newspaper readers fold over the pages to reduce in half the space required to hold the paper up to reading view.

"He's the owner of a doll factory," Sara thought to herself, inventing his past, present, and future. This she decided because he had smooth, sensitive hands. "Every doll receives his personal stamp of approval and blessing before they go to the toy stores. Every little girl who receives one, then is blessed with finding her perfect mate, and she will live happily ever after," she sighed. "This was ordained by the Goddess who was his mother—an immortal who watches over poor single women," she assured herself.

As she daydreamed, the train lurched to a stop to let off passengers. The doll-maker stood up to leave, turned his head to glance back at Sara, smiled a slightly wicked smile, and disembarked taking his future with him. Sara sighed. The next stop was hers.

Inside the office there were the customary Monday morning gatherings of workers sharing their stories of events of the past weekend. Sara stepped quickly past them, acknowledging this one and that one with a nod or smile. Reaching the solitude of her own office cubicle, which was a box of those forlorn grey portable partitions businesses are so likely to use to facilitate the contractions and expansions of their growth, Sara flipped the on switch of her computer, hung up her jacket on a nail, slid her purse in a drawer, then sat down to sort out her work for the day.

"Well, how was it?" remarked a face poking itself around the opening of her cubicle.

"How was what?" Sara replied without looking up.

"You know, your weekend," answered Clint, whose stature and appearance didn't do justice to the name. "So what did you do? You know, over the weekend."

"Oh, nothing much. Went to a couple of orgies, then church on Sunday," Sara answered tersely, but then turned to look at him and smiled to take the edge off her remark.

"Yeah, just as I thought. You single people have such a life with all that freedom. My wife and her sister drug me and the kids all over the mall. The kids like having hotdogs there and going to the toy store, and of course, my wife and sister-in-law use it as an excuse to shop. Then we had a barbecue at our place yesterday. I was obliged, of course, to do the barbecuing. Guess that's what men are good for after they get married. Not like you, though. You get to do whatever you want whenever you want, huh?" complained Clint, rounding out the comment with a heave of the chest. Clint was one of those men who realized in his thirty's that he was a "man" after he'd spent most of his childhood and early adulthood solidly entrenched in nerd-dom.

"Yeah, Clint, I guess that's the best part of being single. I slept in, later put in an appearance at the health club, hit a few single's bars on Saturday night, then read a book all day Sunday. Guess you can't beat that—no interruptions or nothing. Plus, I don't have to *hide my dirty magazines*," she snickered.

"Hey, don't rub it in! Well, I guess I'd better say hello to my CAD system. I'll talk to you later," he called as he withdrew his head.

Sara stared at the wall blankly and wondered why it was that so many ugly men had wives and girlfriends. As she pondered this, her phone rang. It was a call from her girlfriend, Marina. Marina, like herself, was still single. She'd left her alcoholic husband seventeen years ago and at 47 she was still a real prize. Even though the years hadn't been easy for her, her looks avoided being the beneficiary of bad times. Her porcelain skin and the striking black hair of her Spanish ancestry still graced the elegant features of her 5'10" frame and beautiful face. Sara always wondered how such a charming and intelligent woman could still be without a significant other after all these years.

"Hey, Sara, I just thought you'd like to know I met Prince Charming this weekend."

"Yeah, and I'm his fairy godmother, too. Come off it, what did you REALLY do?"

"Oh, went to the movies. Then I indulged myself in a big, decadent hot fudge sundae at Baskin-Robbins 47 Flavors!"

"Oh, wicked! Now I suppose you'll be doing penance at the health club all this week," Sara teased.

"Well, at least now I have an excuse to get out of the house every night this week. You never know, maybe Prince Charming will be there," laughed Marina with a veiled, ever-so-hopeful tone in her voice.

"Well, if he's there, say 'Hello' for me and ask him where he's been all my life!"

"Ok. Guess I'll see you there later in the week, huh?" Marina said as she hung up.

The train ride home that night was less eventful than it was on the morning ride. Sara used the time to stare at the cover of her waiting book. She was sure a guy across the aisle was looking at her, but she kept her eyes from verifying it.

"Maybe this will be the one," she daydreamed. "When I get up to leave, he'll grab my hand and we'll both look into each others eyes, and some music will start playing and he'll start singing a love song to me. Nay—he'll probably just stick his foot out in the aisle, then catch me as I fall. Then we'll gaze into each others eyes and . . ." Her reverie was abruptly interrupted because the train screeched to a halt and this was her stop. As she was leaving, she looked back at the guy she thought was watching her and saw that he was absorbed in the evening newspaper.

As Sara drove the rest of the way home, the usual flutter she would get in her stomach as she headed home gave her a rush of excitement. She tried shoving it down and denying it, but it was like denying that hair was growing from her head. She hated this the most—not being able to deny it, that is. Her thoughts drifted from the various experiences of her day and of the train ride as she pulled into her parking space.

Sara lived in one of those expansive apartment complexes of a dozen look-alike two-story buildings blocked around a patch of green grass, with a man-made stream winding through the grassy area. Climbing the stairs to her second-floor apartment, she took a deep breath through her nose, puffed up her chest, and lifted her chin. She slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. She glanced around quickly. Everything was in order, just as she left it this morning. She stepped in, her eyes surveying the room as if it was all new to her. As she walked through the apartment, she stooped to pick up a couple of globs of cat fur dropped by the Persian cat she was baby sitting for a friend. She meandered down the hall to her bedroom, opened the door and glanced around. Then slowly and deliberately she set down her things, betraying some kind of expectation. A quiver came over her as she tried to convince herself that she was calm-and-cool-and-collected and in control of her anxiety.

But there always came that moment when she couldn't stand it any longer. She forestalled the moment of truth as long as she had the nerve, but eventually the mix of fear and hope took over. There was a fluttering in her chest and she gulped a breath of air and held it still so her body was rigid. Then bracing herself mentally, she looked over at the table where the answering machine sat idly. Then she jerked her head away, expelling the air in her lungs. A sound escaped her throat that was akin to the groan a stomach makes when it's hungry.

"Ok, Sara, you did it again! Every night the same thing—you said you wouldn't do it again, but there you've gone and done it again. Don't you feel like the perfect fool? You *knew* that light wouldn't be blinking, and when it is, it's one of those intrusive insurance people soliciting on a computerized dialing machine." Sara gritted her teeth and stuck her face in the mirror that hung over her dresser. Examining it a moment, she picked up a pair of scissors. Scanning her features and her hair, she stood there a moment just looking at the reflection. Then she began snipping off some strands of hair she decided didn't belong to the look she wanted—a habit she'd acquired over the last few years. Absorbed in this awhile, she stopped and stood back, looking long at the reflection. It wasn't quite right, but she gave up anyway, wiped up the bits of snipped hair from the dresser top, and sauntered away towards the kitchen. Romeo, her 20-pound, industrial-strength alley cat, pushed his coal black face against her leg and insisted upon some attention. "Well, what do you want for dinner tonight, Romie? Some dry kibble? Some wet food? Or maybe a few little mousy bones?"

"Meow," was the only answer Romeo felt obliged to reply. She picked him up and slunk into the swivel rocker facing the sterile, dark gray screen of an "off" television. The room betrayed the gloom of a setting sun, whose last rays were struggling through the window, softly highlighting the dust on the end table with two unburned candles. Romeo purred like a used motor as Sara scratched his head, and she sat there in the fading light thinking about all those words she wasn't able to link together.