

DANCING IN THE RAIN

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Unravelled

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A gust of hot air shot up out from the subway's stairwell like the breath of some monstrous beast, blowing Richard's tie over one shoulder as he descended the steps two at a time. Clutching his laptop bag and his satchel close, he squeezed past the people so he could reach the soonest available train.

He was going to be late; no, he was already late. Suzie was going to be very upset if he missed another performance. It was already going to be bad enough once he told her he would not be able to come on their trip to Grandma's. She'd been looking forward to their small holiday for weeks, but now he just didn't have the time. Not with the breakthroughs he'd been having with his work.

Richard jumped the last few remaining steps and hit the ground running. He rounded a bend in the long, tiled tunnel and found the platforms packed with people.

'What is this?' he asked with a groan. Walking up to the press of people, he felt his hopes die. There above the people hung the big digital timetable display, reading 'DELAYED' on every train line. Richard turned to the person closest to him.

'Do you know what's happened? How long the delay will be?' An old hunched man turned at his question.

'Your delay will last as long as you will it to do so.'

'Okay, thanks.' Richard sighed. What is with the subway and crazy people? They must like the confined space, makes for

simpler realities, maybe. As Richard turned to leave, the old man touched his sleeve.

‘A strange thing, time, people always rush, but there is no catching it,’ the old man said.

Richard studied the wizened face before him. There were a few wisps of grey hair floating around his bare wrinkled scalp, and his eyes kept darting around the floor as if they were looking for something. Time, perhaps.

‘People don’t try to catch time, only to be in a particular place for a particular event,’ Richard replied. The old man winced at his words. ‘Ah, yes.’

There was a loud ‘ding’ from the timetable board; the display had changed to a new time schedule. Richard quickly scanned it to find his train.

‘Fifty minutes,’ he tsked. Renewing his grip, he walked away from the strange old man without a word and headed to his platform. After a moment, Richard turned and was relieved to see the old man had gone, and was not indeed following him as he had feared he might.

The platform only held a few steel benches for seats, all of which were occupied. This didn’t bother Richard; he sat on his leather satchel with his back against a once white tiled column, pulled his laptop out and continued his work to pass the time.

It hadn’t felt like much time had passed at all when the tunnel began to glow from the train’s lights. The train rolled to a stop with screeching brakes. Richard gathered his things before joining the other commuters as they waddled their way on to the train. Due to the delay, the train was a lot busier than was usual, though he did manage to find some room in the very end carriage. Here, the seats were benched along the sides of the train facing inwards, forcing the people to either face each other or stare at the floor. Richard found a few vacant seats together at the very end and so made himself as comfortable as could be for his half-hour journey. He resisted a full three minutes before pulling out his laptop out of

its case. He'd had some very surprising results with his work and was still trying to grasp a better understanding of it all.

The train hummed its bored tune as it began to move. Richard was already lost in thought when movement in front of him caused him to look up.

Oh, no. The old man was sitting in the vacant seat directly opposite. Richard put his head down and continued typing. He could feel the old man's eyes on him as he typed out sentences that barely made any sense.

'What are you writing?' the old man asked. Richard suppressed a sigh.

'Just something for work,' he said without looking up, hoping that would keep the old man satisfied. It wouldn't.

'What is it that you do for work?'

'I'm a theoretical physicist.' That raised a few eyebrows.

'Well, must be something important you're working on ...' the old man said in a questioning tone. Richard knew he wasn't going to give in.

'Basically, we perceive time as linearly constant. Well, I have found reason to believe otherwise, and I'm not talking about relativity either. Experimental physics isn't my specific area, but since this is my own theory I decided to make an exception and the things I've found ... extraordinary results, opening up a whole new level of possibilities. Well, once I've figured it out of course.'

'Interesting,' the old man said. 'It must take some brilliance to get your head around that.'

Richard nodded, uncomfortable with the attention he was drawing to himself.

'Incomprehensible,' he muttered.

'Ah! Have you ever wondered what happens to a mind when it comprehends something incomprehensible?' the old man asked. His steely blue eyes bored into Richard's with a sudden intensity.

He looks just like my father did, Richard noted in the back of his mind.

‘It unhinges,’ the old man continued. ‘What passes for memory becomes reality — the same situations as before but without the memory of remembering them.’

Richard pulled his gaze from the fevered glare of the old man. ‘Sorry, but I really must cont...’

‘What happens when you forget an unforgettable thought? I don’t know, I forgot!’ the man giggled, stamping his feet in glee; then suddenly he froze, looked around slowly and flinched when his eyes met Richard’s. He leant forward and whispered.

‘You mustn’t do it! It will be too much, the algorithms will tear your mind to pieces. There is a reason we perceive it as we have, we can’t handle it any other way!’

Richard was getting tired of this.

‘I wouldn’t have to do it all myself, I would have a comp...’

‘Yes, I know genius, you’ll build a machine to handle the final formula, but by then it’s already too late for you, it doesn’t save your mind. And the machine? It will be taken from you. Right after you’ve lost both your mind and the girls.’

Richard felt himself grow cold at the mention of his girls. The hair rose up on his neck as he stood, knocking his laptop to the floor.

‘What the fuck is this? Have you been watching me?!’

The old man remained seated, a calm expression on his face.

‘Your family is what’s important in this life.’

‘Enough! Shut the hell up,’ Richard pointed a shaking finger. Still, the old man continued.

‘There is hope for you, you don’t have to be like me. We can change it. I ... I lost everything,’ the old man finished in a whimper. ‘Everything, every-fucking-thing!’ The old man shouted as he lunged from his seat, pulling a small knife from his jacket. If Richard hadn’t already been pumped full of adrenaline he might have died then and there. Instead, he sidestepped the flashing knife and struck the old man. It was more push than punch, and the old man pitched harmlessly to the side, toppling other passengers as

they scrambled away from the altercation. Before the old man could get to his feet, Richard grabbed his laptop and ran. Over his shoulder he could still hear the old man screaming.

‘They locked me away for forty years!’

Richard emerged into the next carriage and felt the train begin to slow as it came into the next station. The doors slid open and Richard was the first to push through. He ran through the people waiting on the platform and didn’t stop running. With a glance, Richard was relieved to see he wasn’t being pursued. He left the station and found himself on a busy high street unknown to him. This hadn’t been his stop.

There was a chirp of a car horn and Richard turned to see the slow approach of a taxi. He hopped in without hesitation.

‘Ingleby,’ he told the driver. Sitting in silence holding his trembling hands, he went over the incident again and again. He didn’t know what to think, but he knew he had never been so scared. More so of the old man’s words than his actions.

Richard waved absently to the departing taxi and stepped through his front door, making sure to lock it behind him.

The house was cold and quiet he noted as he relieved himself of his things. He tried to push the ordeal from his mind; he needed to try redeem himself for his absence. He found Janet in the kitchen, rereading the day’s newspaper. She gave him a brief glance before returning back to the newspaper.

‘Hey,’ Richard said.

‘Hi,’ was her only reply.

‘I’m sorry, got caught up at work and then the craziest thing happened on the tube.’

Janet closed the paper.

‘Caught up?’

‘Yes, okay, you know how we’ve been chasing our tails with this and with these advancements it’s easy to get caught up. I’m sorry.’

'You're sorry? Don't apologise to me, go apologise to your nine-year-old daughter. Tell her about being "caught up" while she cries herself to sleep. Dammit, you knew how much that performance meant to her!'

Richard hung his head, guilt plunging in his chest. He turned from her tirade and took the stairs leading to the bedrooms.

Knocking gently on the bedroom door, Richard slowly opened it and stepped through. There was a bundle of blankets on the bed which he sat next to and gave a small shake.

'Knock, knock.'

'Where were you?' came the muffled reply.

'I'm sorry, sweetie, I was so busy working that I didn't realise the time.'

'You forgot about me.'

'No! No, never! I could never forget about you, sweetie.'

There was a shuffle and a small face appeared, framed by the thick blanket.

'Do you promise?' Suzie asked, the tears in her blue eyes ready to fall. Richard dropped to his knees next to the bed, one hand over his heart and the other raised above his head.

'I promise you shall never be forgotten by me, nor shall my love for you ever falter.'

A smile lit up Suzie's face.

'And promise we'll have the best time at Grandma's!'

Richards smile nearly slipped. Grandma's. He changed his mind in that instant. Crazy or not, that old man had a point. Nothing is more important to him than his girls.

'I promise,' he said with a grin. She returned the grin as she sprung to tackle him to the floor, laughing all the while. Wrestling with the small blanket monster, Richard noticed the curtains had only been half drawn. He suppressed the sudden spike of fear inside him and quickly peered outside onto the dark, suburban street. Empty. He drew the curtains closed just as the blanket monster intertwined itself in his legs, suddenly he was pulled

backwards and went down laughing as a smiling Janet appeared above him, holding his arms so the monster could administer its punishment.

‘Ah, sneak attack!’ He cried. The little blanket monster giggled between its small, punishing kisses.

The sound of their laughter filled the house, and it was just loud enough to carry through the curtained window, all the way down to where a hunched old man stood, hidden in the dark street.

A tear rolled down his face and fell across his smile.

It was worth it just to hear them laugh again. He thought. Closing his eyes, he felt himself begin to unravel.

Richard smiled his last smile, and then was gone.



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