



Walker in the Rain

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A Walker in the Rain

The man came from nowhere, his face mimicking recent lightning strikes, his breath a rumbling thunder.

He burst out of the rain and onto the emptying promenade, and there he stood. He raised an arm, opened his mouth as if to shout a name and then, when there was no name to shout, he shook his head sadly.

The crowd glanced once, twice and when nothing more occurred, they glanced away.

All but one.

Beneath a nearby cafe awning, dry from the downpour but moist from the smell of coffee, Peter Carfax watched the impromptu bit of drowned theatre and a puzzled look crossed his face.

Where were the rest of the performers, he wondered? The other rain-interrupting modern-day Thesps willing to make fools of

themselves for fifteen seconds of internet fame? Why was there only one person and nobody holding a camera-phone, or a phone-camera to record this explosion for posterity?

Was there any kind of public theatre any longer that didn't involve a crowd?

He had to know.

That morning's paper held as a make-shift umbrella, Peter ran out and splashed down before the saddened and lonely performer.

"Well? What's the deal? What happens next?" he said.

The lonely Thespian lifted his sad and drowning eyes to Peter.

"The same, I'm afraid, that has happened all the times before."

"The same?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? No zombies, no *Sound of Music* performed by a crowd of what could have been just normal passers-by but who are really... "

The sad eyes of the lonely Thespian swam up and spluttered into confusion.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"You. Aren't you part of some troop, a flash mob that hasn't flashed yet, something like that?"

"No."

Peter, his hands inked wetly with that morning's news, shrugged.

"Then what was all that? Why did you run out here into the—"

The lonely Thespian wagged his saddened and rain-heavied head.

"For a happy ending," he said, his voice as low as retreating thunders, "for the last reel, the moment that should go on forever but never does."

"I don't get it," Peter said, "is *this* part of the show as well? Where are the rest, are they hiding?" He searched the rain and the hurrying crowds and saw nothing but hurrying glances as everyone sought out of the downpour.

Where were the cammers and you-tubers, the facebookers and twittterers ready to capture this strange moment in the rain? Where were the meme-makers, the office-gossipers in waiting ready to take this moment and spread avalanches of email thereafter?

"What show?" The Thespian said.

"*This* show! *Your* show. Don't tell me you ran out here, went through all that rigmarole for no reason. You *have* to be part of some performance...don't you? What other reason could you have for being out here?"

"Were you not listening?"

"I was."

"Then you heard me. I'm out here for a happy ending, at least that was the plan. And it has nothing to do with a *show*." The man spat the words out into the rain as though they were poison.

"A happy ending, that's what you're telling me. You're out here for a happy ending, and what kind of happy ending is it going to be with you soaked to the bone?" Peter said, aware

that he too was halfway to drowning under the downpour and all the way heading toward a good hour of shivering whatever the outcome of his conversation.

The Thespian wagged his head as though explanations would never be enough.

Peter, the last of that day's news now nothing more than pulp in his fist, would not let this go.

"Well?" He said, "what kind of—"

"Coffee," the Thespian said.

"Coffee."

"Buy me a coffee and I'll tell you."

Peter eyed the man suspiciously.

He was dressed well enough, this stranger in the rain. Good suit, not too expensive, but not cheap. Shoes polished, although that might have been an after effect of the downpour. The only out-of-place affectation the man bore was the Gordian knot of a red silk tie hanging down between unbuttoned collars.

A young businessman, perhaps, Peter thought. A go-getter whether he was getting that go behind a desk or in front of one, there was bound to be a desk involved somewhere.

There was nothing, besides the strange behaviour Peter had assigned to street theatre, that would hint at craziness.

"A coffee?" Peter said. "That's it, I buy you a coffee and...and what exactly happens then?"

"I tell you what brings us out here into the rain."

"Us?" Peter checked the rain-emptied streets for any *us* and when there was nobody else to see, at least no more crowd-busting empty-mouthed business men, he repeated the question. "Us?"

The stranger was not a Thespian, he worked, or had worked for an industrial design

company some weeks earlier. His name was Thomas.

He was in love, or so he mumbled.

"What did you say?" Peter asked.

"Like a lightning bolt," Thomas further mumbled.

Peter's brows wrinkled into a confusion of damp hair.

"What are you talking about, love at first sight, is that it? That's why you were out there in the rain acting like a madman?"

Thomas fanned his dripping head over the overlarge coffee mug, diluting the dark brew more than half-milk could have.

"At no sight," Thomas said.

"What?"

Thomas slowly, carefully, brought his overlarge cup to his sodden lips.

"Love at no sight," he said, then took a sip from the coffee.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

Thomas took another sip and as carefully as he'd brought the cup to his lips, he placed it back on the cafe table.

“Tell me, are you in love?” Thomas asked.

“No,” Peter said, “what has that got to do with—”

“Have you ever been in love?”

Peter squirmed in the seat. Strangers weren't supposed to ask you about love, only for directions or spare change.

“That's none of your business,” he said.

“It's all of my business if you want to know what I was doing out there. If you want me to answer your questions.”

“What difference does it make if I've ever been in love? You're the one acting like a loony-tune out there in the rain, not me. You're the one dripping wet from—”

"We're both wet," Thomas said.

Peter was about to protest when he felt the dampness of his own skin touching against the material of his suit. That awful uncomfortable feeling that he hadn't experienced in years.

It was coming out of the sea with a bathing costume too close and feeling like it might get closer still before you ever got a chance to dry.

"Fine, we're both lunatics, but I'm the lunatic who bought the coffee, so I'll ask the questions. First off, who are these us you talked about? You said that like there were more of you, like there was some kind of—"

Thomas nodded as he spoke. "There are more."

"More lunatics?"

"More people in love at no sight."

Exasperated, Peter shook his head and reached for his coffee on the table. What a perfect, or as near to perfect fool he'd been rushing out there to find out what the strange performance was all about. Oh, who was he kidding, he'd run out there to be part of the unfolding

drama. To break the monotony of the rain and the lunch hours that were never quite an hour long and always seemed to go quicker than any other part of the day.

And now what did he have?

A lunatic and a bill waiting at the end of all this.

"Love at no sight, you still haven't explained exactly what that means," Peter said, after he'd taken a sip of coffee and allowed himself a baffled smile.

"Sure. Ever watch the movies, the romantic ones?"

Too many to admit, Peter thought.

"Not often," he said.

"Well you must have seen enough to know how they end, right?"

"How they end?"

Thomas nodded, and brought the nod forward into a conspiratorial huddle over his coffee mug.

“The hero is always running at the end, you ever noticed that? You ever see one of those films where the hero isn’t banging on a church door or running through the rain or a crowd on New Year’s Eve?”

Peter’s eyelids fluttered as he replayed his movie rentals on the back of his lids and looked for static endings devoid of battered church doors, rain and New Year’s Eve celebrations.

He couldn’t find one.

He lifted a finger as though he might stab the elusive ending with it, but found nothing but the warm coffee air of the cafe.

“See?” Thomas said. “All those people in those movies they’re always running at the end. They’re always running toward their happy endings.”

“And you’re saying... ?” Peter said, waiting for his thoughts to be fleshed out by Thomas’s reply.

“I’m saying there are plenty of us out there doing the same, walking, running in the

rain, knocking on church doors, timing our hundred metre dash to the New Year countdown, all in the hopes that once we stop running there'll be someone there doing the same, someone running in from the opposite direction, someone on the other side of that church door or ready to kiss us when the countdown finishes."

"Ludicrous," Peter said, his word almost a chuckle as it came out.

Thomas leaned back, shrugging away the disbelief.

"Any more ludicrous than speed dating or a computer matching two people together from a string of data? Any more ludicrous than singles night in a bar where everybody's playing the same stupid games and everybody a liar? Love isn't exactly a science, is it now? If it isn't a science then maybe it's a fantasy, and that's the only way to treat it."

The laugh Peter had prepared stuck in his throat.

Could Thomas be right, Peter wondered, and would it work for him also?

Would it work at all? He'd done the speed dating thing, ushered from one desperate minute without connection to the next, listening for a ringing bell to move again to the next desperate moment. And the bars, the lonely bars filled with lonely people pretending hard that they might complete each other. The business of love was filled with such lost connections, such lonely nights where drinks and bad company substituted for anything worthwhile. Never love. Never anything solid or meaningful.

Just like this damn lunch hour, Peter thought. Never long enough, always rushing by faster than I want it to. Doesn't last.

But I can't follow this madness, can I? I'm not actually going to believe that if I run through the rain I'll meet someone where I never met them all those other times before. That's just—

"Wait," Peter said, "has this ever worked, this... what do you call it, this thing you're doing?"

"We call ourselves Walkers, we have a website."

"I didn't doubt it, everybody has a website now. But does it work?"

The rain that had pooled in the man's eyes throughout their impromptu cafe appointment now cleared a little, brightened by excitement.

"You're interested, I mean, you want in?"

Yes, Peter thought, I want this to work, God do I want it to work. I want to come home from work to someone, anyone. I want to buy meals for more than one that take longer than three minutes in a microwave. I want to put pictures on my desk at work like everyone else. I want to buy oversized Teddy Bears and chocolates and flowers and...

I want to be in love.

"I never said that now, did I? I'm interested that's all," Peter said.

"Then answer the question I asked," Thomas said.

"Which question?" Peter said, knowing well enough what the question was and the only answer he could give.

"Have you ever been in love before?" Thomas said.

Would it all fall apart here before he'd even had a chance to become excited? Would he even have a chance to build a small wall of hope, or would his answer stop the building?

"Depends," Peter said.

"Not good enough," Thomas replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Yes or no answer, it's not hard. You must know the answer, you have to."

Harder than Thomas thought. He'd wanted to be in love, couldn't remember a time when he didn't think about being in love, but no matter what he'd tried, no matter which woman he'd been with, there was never anything he could describe as love. Never that elusive

feeling that would be known when it was known and could never be forced or mimicked.

Peter sucked in a hard coffee tasting breath and let out his answer like a rushed confession.

“No,” he said.

Then it really began.

He felt stupid, overdressed, awkward, and the Walk hadn't even begun yet. And what would happen when it began? Would he, like Thomas, end up rain-soaked in the middle of a disappearing crowd with nothing to show for his endeavours but a mouth full of silence and the awkward glance of a passing audience?

It all seemed so ridiculous, so pointless, so... much like every love affair he'd had before.

Not that they'd been love affairs, more gropes in the darkness looking for light switches that he'd never been able to find.

Maybe this time?

Maybe pigs would fly, unicorns would mate and the world would spin in the opposite direction.

Peter let out a frustrated sigh, his body deflating as he looked out upon the mid-afternoon crowds.

Was there someone in there for him? Would he find his love at no sight, some other Walker perhaps who would collide with him in amongst the awkward glances and turned heads? Or would he end up like so many others; spinsters and bachelors in the making, resigned to a life of pets and hobbies, friends and one-bedroom apartments where there

would never be tiny footfalls, no matter what the time of day. Years stretching out ahead with always one side of the bed cold on waking.

Peter gritted his teeth.

God Damn! He hadn't been thinking about any of this until he'd met Thomas. Hadn't been worried about the future or love or the lack thereof. He'd been unhappy enough to get on with life with his job and his microwave dinners and his lunch hour that always felt half that length. He'd been happy in his unhappiness.

Now?

Now he had no choice. He had to do something before it was too late, before he went out and bought a fish tank and a subscription to a craft magazine. He had to find love before it was—

Peter ran into the crowd.

The rehearsed motions of the website told him how to play this, how to run like he was in a movie, how to make that impact that would inevitably, through the unseen magic of wishes and desire, bring the love of his life to him.

He ran.

He saw himself in reflection as he passed the store fronts.

I'm doing this, he thought. I'm the romantic hero. The dashing leading man rushing towards the love of my life and soon to have her in my arms. God damn I feel good. I feel like this actually might work!

He was too busy looking at himself to see the woman turn, the umbrella lifted.

Then all he saw were stars, but not the good kind.

There was nothing in her eyes that hinted at love, only concern. They were not limpid pools that trapped him in their beauty, nor were they worthy of poetry, even Peter's mangled haiku. There was no love at first sight going on here, but there was a terrible banging inside Peter's head.

"What happened?" he said, lifting himself forward.

"Oh thank God you're okay," the woman said, "you ran right into the tip of my umbrella, I thought you... well I didn't like to think

what was happening. You were rambling, delirious for a time there."

Peter blinked. The stars were still there, but not quite a galaxy any longer, just a few constellations imprinted on the back of his lids.

"Delirious?" Peter said.

"Rambling," the woman answered.

"Was I?"

"Incoherent."

"Really?"

"Speaking in tongues."

“What did I say?” Peter asked.

The woman shrugged.

“I don’t know, but whatever it was, it scared the life out of me. Sounded very strange.”

Peter blinked again and now the constellations were gone. He stumbled onto his feet and reached up to where he now had the imprint of an umbrella tip in the flesh of his forehead. He winced as he touched the sore flesh.

“Looks painful,” the woman said.
“I’m sorry.”

“No, really, it’s fine,” he said, searching the street for a familiar sight.

“Are you sure you’re alright? Do you want me to call anyone or—”

Peter was already walking, his seasick stride carrying him toward the cafe where he spent every lunch hour wishing for more time.

What I was thinking, he thought as he headed away from the umbrella lady and her apologies and toward a cafe. You don’t just run through a crowd and find someone at the end of it all. That’s not how it works, not even in the movies. There are all kinds of nonsense you have to experience beforehand. All kinds of back-and-forth, and that’s what I could never stand. That’s why I never fell in love. I could never get past the back-and-forth ever. Couldn’t make the leap.

Peter fell heavy into a booth at the back of the cafe and there he nursed his head and a drink that he was beginning to suspect was the wrong one.

Had he ordered a latte? He was sure he'd ordered his usual Costa-Rican blend, half-milk, two sugars. Well, maybe not so sure.

Idiot, he thought as he sat rubbing his throbbing forehead and watching his untouched drink.

Love at no sight, now who had ever heard of something so ludicrous? Who, but the loneliest and scared of people, would buy into such a disappointing scheme? Fear was a great motivator, but no amount of lonely years ahead could be as bad as running right into the tip of an umbrella in public. You didn't find love that way; you found ridicule and a spot on the internet. Fifteen seconds of fame, maybe they'd put music to his moment of shame. Maybe he'd become a flash-in-the-pan chunk of entertainment and they would give him a nickname.

Maybe someone would see that and take pity on him and love him and—

Peter closed his eyes and saw the cafe as a throbbing image on the back of his lids.

Idiot, lonely old fool. Love at no sight, it's a comical idea. You'll be buying potions next from strange old women in dusty old shops. You'll be flipping through the news to get to the horoscopes in the hope that someone saw your future and that future wasn't so empty.

Love at no sight.

Peter smiled, eyes still closed.

Oh, well, at least it would be a story to tell to the eventual menagerie of pets he bought to keep him company in his bachelorhood. He would tell the parrot, or the dog, or the cat or terrapins or whatever was easiest enough to

look after, the tale of when he ran through a crowd looking for love and all he found was a moment of pain and the indelible mark of metal on flesh. Come, furry and not so furry friends, here the tale of the desperately lonely man looking for love in all the wrong places. Come, listen to this not-so-movie-like tale of desperation and yet more desperation.

Damn, but what did you have to do to fall in love anyway? What did they do in the movies, had he missed some essential part that happened pre the running through the rain, the banging on the church door? Why hadn't he asked Thomas more questions about the success rate of this madness? Why hadn't he—“

“Scuse me, I think you have my drink.”

The smile did not leave Peter, it grew at the sound of the woman's voice.

Love at no sight.

The concept, the sound of the concept ran through his mind as though spoken by the woman. And that voice. Her voice. Was it possible, could you fall in love with a voice?

Love at first sound?

Peter's smile grew warm enough, spread far enough for him to forget the pain in his forehead and the shame he'd felt outside. He just wanted to hear more of that voice, savour it before he opened his eyes and saw the beauty attached. And it could only be beauty that belonged to that voice. Only Angel's possessed such vocal chords.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry, but I think you have my drink. I ordered a latte and you have a latte. They brought me a straight coffee..."

This was it. A moment he'd waited for his whole life, whether he liked to admit it or not. He had to make this work right, had to say the perfect thing, the perfect way. First impressions lasted. More so now than ever before.

Peter cleared his throat.

He had the words in his mind, the perfect words, the words that would bring her to him. No clichés here. No pickup lines or false declarations. In his mind it was smooth, and the following years were already playing on that secret cinema screen.

This would work, it had to. Every couple had a story of their beginning, a story of meeting, and wasn't this as good as any movie story? As good as any rain soaked run, church service interrupted or New Year countdown.

Love at first sound.

Peter opened his eyes and his mouth at the same time.

His words, so perfectly formed in his mind, weren't so perfect anymore.

A string of nonsense, a tongue-twisting torrent of confusion dropped off his lips.

The woman, her face a mask of caution, backed away.

"It's okay," she said, her smile as warm as her voice, "you keep it. It's yours. I'll buy another."

Peter stood, confused.

Wait! He thought he shouted. Wait. I have something to tell you. Something I've never

told anyone else before. And I can only tell it to you.

But it came out as a grunt and a shake, a mixed bag of guttural noises that would have terrified most, and did.

All eyes were on him in the cafe.

All but the eyes he wanted, the eyes of a woman he'd heard and now was walking away.

He called out one last time.

But what sounds he managed were worse than any that came from his mouth before.

The cafe door swung shut.

Peter reached out as though he might draw the woman and the voice back to him, pull on

an invisible string that held them both together.

But it was as desperate as any of his other moves that morning. And just as embarrassing.

All eyes were upon him.

Peter shrunk into his seat, there to ponder his untouched latte and the future.

He wondered if his life were a movie what he would do next?

Would there be another act, would he run out into the rain again, this time finding his voice and his love if only for that one more push into the unknown?

Peter stared at the door to the cafe and the rain-soaked afternoon beyond.

She was out there somewhere, if he had the courage to look, to try.

Then again...

The pet shop was just around the corner.

There was a sale on too, and that was a kind of happy ending, wasn't it?

Peter burst out of the rain and into the crowd.

He dodged left and right, but there was no confusion on the faces of those he passed. No wonder that wasn't satisfied on seeing what he had in his hands.

The bag containing three goldfish had burst.

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