

You Had To Be There

We left the stadium as twilight dawned. The subway station was crowded with disappointed spectators. I told my friend we'd have to transfer twice, but on the first train, my friend asked two women for directions anyway. They said they were going to the same place, but also didn't know how to get there. Once again, I said I knew.

At the first station to transfer, I led the way. One of the women asked if I was sure this was right. I said yes, absolutely. One of the women had curly blonde hair and a pale face full of pimples. The other had straight brown hair tied back tightly, and was plumper, with glasses, with darker, more visible facial fuzz and a feminine moustache. Both were nice women, friendly, at least. We shared our experiences as foreigners living in this homogenous country.

At the next station, the women led the way. I thought that maybe they thought we were too drunk to be relied on, even though I wasn't, though I guess I couldn't speak for my friend. They seemed indecisive. But they also seemed careful, attuned. I thought that now that I thought about it, maybe I hadn't really absolutely known the way for sure. That maybe my friend and I were lucky to have run into these friendly ladies, lucky to have made these new friends helping us home. They studied their surroundings with the diligence of serious students. But they did seem indecisive.

We hurried along a track as a train arrived. I thought it was the wrong track, just by the very nature of us hurrying along it. The women now leading the way stopped, turned, and the four of us convened. I said I thought it was the wrong track. The blonde asked: "You think?" Then the brunette, taking the blonde by the elbow, told her to follow her onto the train anyway. We followed them through the closing doors, the subway car more crowded than the station, the four of us all touching each other incidentally.

Only after the train pulled out from underground did the others realize we were going in the wrong direction. I told them to remember that

I'd told them so, told them before that this was the wrong train. Out the window, it didn't look like winter anymore. I think that's when we all realized that we'd not only gotten on the train in the wrong direction (the wrong direction on the right subway line, the train on the wrong side of the track), but in fact had gotten on the wrong train line altogether, a train off the wrong track we'd been correct to hurry along presumably towards another, after all. Neither our desired direction nor its reverse, it was a third direction. And outside were trees that weren't supposed to bloom until spring but had already.

I led the way off the wrong train at the first stop. We all wondered aloud both where the hell we were and how it could have gotten so hot so fast. The dawning of twilight lingered, yes, that dawning of twilight, as if the sun would never set, as if it could stay this hot all day. I unzipped my winter coat and loosened my scarf.

The tracks ran one way in the middle of the street, so there was no way of simply going back. My phone was dead and the GPSs on my friend's and the women's phones were not responding. The street had two lanes on either side of the one-way tracks, and all four were empty. We walked along, searching for a signal.

We waved down the first car we saw, a convertible, top down, coming up behind us, a foreigner like us at the wheel, a man in his fifties. He had a patchy gray and black beard. His gray t-shirt had small holes around the neck, and his safari hat was, even from a distance of five feet, visibly crusty with sweat. He spoke first, and I think the four of us realized at the same time, then, that we hadn't waved him down so much as he'd stopped to ask us something.

He said: "Have you seen a woman? A woman, about fifty? Dark hair, usually curly, about five foot seven?"

By his use of feet and inches in his description, it was apparent that he was an American. Unless, actually, he'd assumed that it was we who were American and, to make it easier for us to help him, somehow instantly thought to do us the favor of arithmetic, conversion.

The plump brunette said: "No. We haven't seen anyone. Can you help us find... is there a track that heads back the other way?"

The most likely American man scratched his neck and adjusted his tattered collar. His other hand remained on the steering wheel, its arm's

elbow locked. He said: "Listen, kids. Here's a real problem. My wife's missing. Went missing not a week ago. Thirty years... we come here, she goes missing. You ask me about directions..."

And then, as if to make some kind of point, he rolled up the window of his convertible. Shaking his head, he pulled off the shoulder and into the wide, empty street engulfing the tracks.

The blonde yelled: "Asshole!"

The brunette yelled, running after him: "How dare you! You don't even know the half of it! You don't know us! You think *you* have a real problem? We left the stadium almost an *hour* ago!"

The man flipped us off as he waned out of sight. I felt sorry. The brunette ambled back to us crying. The blonde took her elbow and wiped her tears. I turned to my friend. He seemed unsure whether to laugh or cry.

"We should find that guy's wife," I said. "That'd show him." The brunette crying laughed.

We continued down the street in silence, the two women barely ahead of us, until my friend discreetly asked me what I thought of the blonde. I looked at him hoping he could tell I thought he was crazy, and he laughed.

"Maybe I'm just going crazy, man," he said. But he looked serious. "I dunno."

The supposedly urban street (a single stop away from the very busy city stadium) was lined with two-story houses with grass yards, separated not just by driveway, but by extra space, grassy and fenceless. The blonde had her arm around the brunette's waist, forever consoling. The sidewalk we walked beside ended without warning, the way paths on snow-shoveled sidewalks end, and with it, its curb, so that the lawns came out to meet the street like welcome mats. Sprinklers oscillated. Dandelions persisted as if oblivious of winter, though strangely, here it felt like late spring at least. We followed the women until the road ended at a perpendicular. The women looked at us, though not so much for guidance, it seemed, but to make us feel included in the decision we would in theory make as a group. My friend and I both shrugged.

But before we had to make a decision, I saw, and pointed at, a house down the street to the left, and the convertible parked in its driveway.

We all looked.

“There he is,” the blonde said, amazed, appealing to me for verification.

“It’s him all right,” I said.

They hesitated, more awestruck than scared, I thought. I stepped past them. We walked along the side of the street opposite the house. Radio music emanated from that direction. The women and my friend followed me in silence. Once we were across the street from the driveway with the convertible, we saw that the music was coming from the open garage, inside of which, reclining bare-chested in a beach chair and wearing sunglasses that did little to disguise his identity, sat the rude American supposedly searching for his wife.

Walking past the convertible, I ran my fingers along its bright, glossy exterior, and then further along over the top of the driver’s side window, rolled up but roofless, its pineapple leather interior vulnerable as an animal sleeping on its back. At the edge of the open garage, I stopped, and behind me, so did my friends and the women.

The man placed the beer mug from which he was drinking onto the cement floor, turned down the radio’s volume, removed his glasses, and leaned forwards, on guard. His gray shirt, in his lap, he quickly put on.

“Your wife went missing a week ago,” I said, intending to put him at ease, to assure him that we were here to help, not hurt or rob him in retaliation for his rudeness, or anything like that.

“What do you want?” he said, looking around his garage. There were shelves and buckets of tools and athletic equipment, bikes, skateboards.

“You have kids?” I said.

He didn’t move.

“Look, we’re lost,” I said. “We don’t know where we are. Do you think you can help us... or we can help you?”

He fidgeted, shaking his head spastically side-to-side, his safari hat following, not so much to refute, it seemed, so much as to shake himself out of a truly horrible dream.

That’s when the women lost their patience. With me, with him.

“You asshole!” the brunette said, charging dramatically, so that her friend, the blonde, had time to react and hold her back. “You asshole! Let. Me. Go!”

The blonde tried to hush her.

“Asshole!” the brunette continued. “Asshole! You won’t even... and you tell *us*... you have *no* idea! He’s a... let me go! You’re an asshole!”

The man watched this display hunched forward in the recliner, his forehead in one hand, hiding behind all he could.

“Asshole!” the brunette said for the last time, because that moment, the blonde, already restraining her with a hug, put her face right up to her friend’s angry mouth, forehead first, then nose, then hard, stoic lips. Defiant lips. Lips that said without moving, that showed without moving: “I know, I know, love... I know... You’ve been waiting your whole life and are sick of it but I beg you...”

“It’s okay,” the man said. “Let her go.”

The blonde turned but did not budge.

“Let her go,” the man repeated, raising his voice. “Let her go!” He reclined, sighing outwards through his nose, sliding his hands along his thighs, forwards and back, and then leaning back, looking up, locking them behind his head. “Let her go, what does it matter...”

It was an invitation to sit, and the four of us took it as such. There were four more lawn chairs folded, leaning on one wall of the garage. We each took one and sat around the man. He’d barely moved the whole time, his hands still united, his gaze still obstructed by the roof. For whatever reason, perhaps a combination of his frustration over the present circumstances of his life along with his possible understanding that unusual circumstances usually yield more unusual circumstances, he didn’t seem at all surprised by our behavior. We waited expectantly. Finally, he relaxed. He picked up his beer, took a sip, put it back down. “There’s a mini-keg in the house,” he said. He took his shirt off again. “Seriously, a mini-keg. That’s what my life’s come to.”

“We have to get home,” the brunette said adamantly. She was sweating. Her cheeks were pink. Her hair was unraveling and greasy.

“I’m sorry,” said the man, the rude American. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said the blonde. “We’re sorry about your wife.”

The man drank and rubbed his eyes with the back of his other wrist.

“It’s just that...” the blonde started again. “You can’t just go on assuming you’re the only one with real problems. Like your problems are so big you can’t help anyone else, and it just takes five seconds. And when you say what you said, ‘you don’t know real problems’, or whatever it was

you said, that's... you just can't... how can you even think to say that? It's not right, it's not cool. And you really don't know the half of it."

The brunette was weeping, rubbing her eyes with both her hands, holding her glasses in one, rubbing her tears over her fuzzy face and through her greasy, disheveled hair.

"You really don't!" she, the brunette, shouted just then.

"I'm sorry," the man said again. "I swear..."

"You *swear*?" the brunette said, in her threatening manner.

"I swear," the man said. "On my missing wife, I swear. What more do you want?"

I'd had enough. The poor guy, the poor man. This was too much. So I spoke up. "Stop," I said. "Wait. Hold up." They were all looking at me, all but my friend, who looked at the ground, or more precisely, the man's empty mug of beer. "What *is* the half of it? What is our real problem? That we're lost?" I wonder now why I didn't bring up the heat, improbable as it was for the season, and as intense as ever in that garage.

Now the brunette wailed, absolutely wailed. The blonde took her hand and held it firmly with both her hands, bringing her friend's hand up to her lips, not to kiss it, but to – in that foreign, feminine way – calm down its master.

"You're not lost, though," the man said, and I instantly understood. "You found me," he needlessly continued. "I offended you. You came after me. And you found me."

The brunette shook her head fiercely, negatively.

The man reacted: "Unless," he said. "Unless I was lost, and then you found me. So then, you are still lost, even if now, I am found. I don't know..."

The brunette shook her hand free from her friend's clasp. "No!" she shouted. "No, you're home! We're lost. Nothing's changed!"

The blonde rubbed her friend's shoulders.

"But we're together," I said. "His wife is missing..."

The brunette and the blonde conversed without speech or motion. Finally, the blonde nodded. Her blessing.

We followed the American expatriate inside. We sat on the floor of his air- conditioned living room drinking beers fresh from the mini-keg as he re-arranged his fireplace.

“Tell me,” he said.

It was obvious to us all what he meant. He squatted by the fire, rolling the burning logs imperfectly. The fire grew and glowed. The American’s scars underneath his patchy beard seemed analogous to the blonde’s pimples and to the brunette’s premature wrinkling beneath her painfully apparent down.

“You can tell me,” he repeated.

“It’s bad,” the blonde said.

“I bet,” the man said.

“No, but it is,” the brunette said, still teary-eyed, sniffing. “Like, really bad. It’s the truth... It’s really bad...”

The man said nothing. Over the fireplace was a window. And outside this window, it was snowing. It was the strangest thing – no chimney over this fireplace, just a window...

And then the man said something I thought I’d never forget. He said: “Bad truth...”

But it’s true. I did forget. I think he said: “Bad truth is truth and the twilight of understanding.” But he might’ve said: “Bad truth is truth and the twilight of belief...” or “... of faith...” or “...of knowing...” or “...truth and the inkling of twilight dawning...” or... “... the inkling of truth and twilight dawning...” I don’t remember... But he had been kind to us and his words which I’ve forgotten and may never remember, may never say, encouraged the poor women, the girls, encouraged them to tell, to please do tell, comforted them, encouraged them. So that when the bad truth finally did come out and was a horrible truth, truly, undeniably horrible, it was the telling of it that impressed me, the little I managed to remember, the telling, with the women there confiding to the rude American, and the season, whichever season it was, and the beer, and but especially the women, the telling of that abominable truth being just a very beautiful thing, a lovely scene. You had to be there. You really did.