

Jessie's Fountain

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By John Henry Carrozza

Jessie entered the street with uncertainty, but with a certain definitive uncertainty which she trusted willingly. *This city has tortured me for as long as I've lived here*, she thought. *I am at the mercy of its magical charm - the lights and the sounds which once beckoned me like a siren, and I like a lonely sailor, followed, now hold me trapped as if I were a bug beneath a sheet of glass.*

She walked quickly away from the revolving door, away from the tall building which contained her meager office and governed her very life ... across the concrete slabs of the great capitalistic monument's piazza, and into the waiting arms of the city.

As she walked, she thought of her husband - no, her ex-husband; he had left three days ago, giving no reasons, only leaving behind a note to say that his lawyer would contact her about the divorce papers. Anger - or was it sorrow? Both. and not knowing why it had come to this, to the feeling of total apathy towards the world, the city, her job, her life.

She continued walking, purposefully, yet at random. She passed a cafe and nearly stopped ... but no, she thought, she should not stop there. She must keep moving, onward, into the swarming nest of the city, like a fish, lest she drown in the thick Manhattan air. She came at last to a park, which

she entered because it looked inviting, and she saw in the outstretched branches of the trees an attempt by the world to say "I'm sorry. It's not my fault It's those mindless human masses that call themselves society. It's their fault. Honest."

She had just gotten over her mother's death when things began disintegrating. One day, her boss informed her that her position would be alleviated within a month, and that perhaps she should begin looking for something else, and that he would help any way he could. *Thank you*, she thought. *Why doesn't he just say "you're fired" - it would be more civil.*

After five years of patiently sitting behind a desk and typing and answering his phone, not even asking for an opportunity to make something of herself, but doing her job and doing it well ... she even picked out anniversary cards for his wife ... after all that, she suddenly finds herself overwhelmed by the system, by the never-ending struggle of life and love and money. And who was trying to help her? Wasn't there anyone who could just pretend they really cared? Couldn't someone pat her on the back and say that everything would be alright? She would know they were lying, but at least they would be lying in her favor.

She continued her pace through the vegetated trails of the park, and she felt alone, as if there were nobody in the city except for her - as if the place were merely a machine, populated by robots which blended in with their

surroundings, adapting as she could not ... and she felt suddenly like an outcast ... a victim ... an unsuspecting fish amidst a plethora of lures.

And then suddenly it appeared, there in her path, as if she were Stanley and she had just found Dr. Livingston. She stopped for the first time since she left her office, and she stared at the fountain.

It was circular fountain, fashioned of stone, and in its center stood the statue of a beautiful woman. The figure was carved as if it stood amidst a bouquet of wildflowers, squirrels at her feet, a phoebe bird perched, singing, on her proud shoulder. A fountain of water sprayed over her from someplace behind her head, and she was adorned with a pattern of wet drapery of the Baroque era. Upon her face, she held a peaceful gaze, as if she had found true happiness and was staring into its eyes and could never lose sight of its splendor. The serenity and rigidity of that face caused Jessie to slow her breathing, and she suddenly felt relaxed, as if her walking was a curse that had been lifted.

A small sign stood beside the fountain. It read: MAKE A WISH.

The fountain's bottom was strewn with coins, and Jessie rifled through her purse for a quarter she had dropped into it during lunch. She found the coin, and held it firmly in her hand as she snapped her purse shut and gazed up at the face of the statue.

If only that could be me, she thought. The dignity ... the piety ... the beauty. I wish I were in her place. And she tossed the coin into the pool.

As the kerplunk of the coin reached her ears, she became suddenly aware of her surroundings, and the sound of the rushing fountain erupted in her skull, followed by the noises of children playing on the lawn, and of the busy streets beyond the park, of a thousand radio sets throughout the city blaring baseball games and afternoon quiz shows, and of factories churning far in the distance, humming and pounding out the backbeat of a symphony of monstrous proportions, without beginning or end, until for a moment she felt dizzy, and then everything went black, and silence shattered her eardrums.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the trees and the skyscrapers beyond them and the paved trails of the park and a bench beneath a tree and an old man sitting there with a magazine rolled up in one hand, feeding squirrels with the other. She felt relief and a simple peace, and she sensed that she was smiling, and she was happy.

In the center of her vision was a towering building, topped with cranes, which were pecking like birds as the structure grew higher, reaching for the sky.

That is where I want to be, she said to herself. There, at the top of that building, looking out across the city, higher than all of man's inventions - above his fears and complex pleasures - enjoying the simplicity of being free and of being myself.

She decided that she would go there, to that building, and work there, high above the city, where no one could reach her to hurt her ever again. But suddenly she could not move. She tried to step forward, but nothing happened. She tried looking down at her feet to see if they were stuck, but she could not adjust her gaze. She realized then that she could not feel the weight of her arms or her body, and she was frozen - staring unblinkingly at the skyscraper at the heart of the city.

Then, it began to rain. She could see at the bottom of her vision the old man sitting idly on the wooden bench, legs crossed, magazine in hand, feeding the squirrels. He did not move. He did not leap up and seek shelter from the rain. The squirrels busily picked assorted nuts from around his feet, cleaning the cobbled path, which was not being darkened by spots of falling water. A young lady walked across a distant lawn, slowly, with a hand above her eyes, shielding them from the sun.

And then she saw the bright reflection of the afternoon sun as a shimmering spot of glare on the many windows of the distant tower. She remembered her ex-husband suddenly, and her office, where she had

worked all day, and her walk across the city blocks, and the park ... the wish ... the fountain.

God! She wanted to scream She tried to open her mouth and vibrate her larynx and send a cry for help into the air. She heard no scream - only a silent, piercing noise which was her brain trying to accept the reality of the moment.

The scape before her began to whirl, and soon she felt herself spinning out of control, her vision becoming a blur, until finally she reached the control in her brain to make it stop.

Wait! She cried to herself, as the panorama screeched to a halt before her. *This can't be happening*, she thought. *I can't be a statue in a park in Manhattan. I'm a human being of flesh and blood, and I'm dreaming. Of course ... statues can't think, and I'm thinking right now; ergo, I'm not a statue. That's right. No! ... I'm a human ... I'm not soul trapped inside of a marble statue. I'm ...* She tried to close her eyes, but her eyelids refused her will and so she tried to focus frantically instead, until her mind once again took hold of her consciousness, and her vision became a secondary reality. Images of her life raced across her mind, and she saw her mother, standing on a porch and calling to her from across the yard. *I'm coming, Mother! I'm coming ...* and she wanted to get up from the sandbox and run to her, but she could not, and she wanted to cry, but she could not, and so she pictured

instead her own face, tears streaming down her cheeks. her visage suddenly pale and frightening.

Her dream was interrupted by a clap of thunder, and as the world of the park came back into focus, she saw the old man standing up, carrying away the bag of nuts, and the squirrels scurrying towards the trees, as the landscape slowly became hazy and wet, and the top of the tower faded into a distant shimmering light.

The hours ran together, and the days became numbers, and soon were forgotten; and now she had lost track of time altogether. How many days (months?) have passed? How many times has the old man come to feed the squirrels? How many children have skipped along the walk before her, with an ice cream or a soda? And how many mothers after them?

The tower grew taller every day, and looked to be nearing completion. A tapering hat was being erected upon it, the highest building in the city. She had heard many a businessman talk about it as he stood with a partner beside the fountain. He would point to it and say: "There she is, the Empire State Building. Can you believe it? She's over a hundred stories. Hundred and two I think it is. Christ, can you imagine the stack of money that's in it? They were calling those builders crazy just a few months ago, and now they're celebrities. I wish I had an office up there, don't you?" Throw in a

coin, she thought, and you will. But they never did. Businessmen never threw money into the fountain. The wishers were always either lonely young men with their heads full of dreams, or lonely young women, or children, who begged pennies from their reluctant mothers. She wondered just how many wishes these waters had bestowed, and if there was any magic left ... anywhere at all.

Thud. Long pause. Crackle. Thud. Thud. Crackle. Boom! The fireworks exploded above the lamp-lit city, celebrating the opening of the Empire State Building. Jessie felt an excitement unlike any she had ever felt before. She watched the rockets parade across a dark pillow, which was the night sky, and erupt into extasy before drifting dreamily to sleep upon the crowd-filled streets. She watched as the lights flicked on floor by floor, rising like a thermometer to the top of the building. When the highest window opened its eve, Jessie smiled. She knew that the statue had been smiling all along, for all the many days, betraying her loneliness - a mask of the soul behind the marble face. But now the face was not betraying her. At last, she was truly happy, and she smiled. That is my office, she thought. There, closest to the stars of anyone in the city, is where I will be soon, she thought. Someday soon.

The next day, according to a person who stood with a companion behind her, was Saturday. The old man came and fed the squirrels earlier than usual, and a group of young girls had a picnic on the lawn behind the bench which lasted for quite some time, and finally the brightness of the trees grew dim, and it was nearly dusk when the bikers arrived.

Two young gentlemen peddled their bicycles across the park, beneath the maples and dogwoods, along the cobblestone pathways and cemented trails. Jessie saw them far in the distance as they ventured, in and out of sight, until finally they reached the path which led in front of the fountain. One of the two slowed, and then continued on. But the second one stopped. He was nicely dressed in knickers and a well-pressed shirt, and his hair was combed to perfection. He stepped off his bike and put down the stand, and gazed up at Jessie.

No, she thought. He's not staring at me. He's staring at the statue. But my, he is handsome.

"Tom," came a voice suddenly, as the other biker re-entered the scene. "What are you doing?"

But he did not break his gaze or acknowledge his friend. Mechanically, he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a silver coin. He tossed the quarter into the pool without even looking down, and she heard the familiar 'kerplunk'.

"Jesus, Tom! That was a quarter dollar!"

For several long moments, he stood staring up at the statue, and Jessie tried to turn her eyes to meet his gaze, but he remained only in the corner of her vision, and then suddenly he was on his bike and peddling away behind his friend, still locking back as he trailed out of Jessies sight.

Moments later, she closed her eyes, and the dim city grew darker and violently black, and then Jessie felt weak, her weight pulling down upon her, like the groping hands of an earthquake, and she felt her knees buckle beneath her, and the cool evening air rushing all around her, and soon she was dreaming about her office and her splendid view of the city.

When she opened her eyes, she did so with great effort, as if her eyelids were bags of sand. She was wet, and she was shivering, and slowly a starry sky came into focus above her, and a warm face peering down in anticipation. She whispered her first word in ages, which was a question.

"Tom?"

"Hello," he said, and he looked puzzled. "How did you know my name?"

"Oh," she said suddenly, but it came out as a weak cough. She spoke quietly and carefully then, struggling with every word. "You ... look ... like ... a ... Tom." She coughed lightly again.

He laughed. "Thank you." He grew solemn then. "You took quite a bump on your head. You must have fallen into the fountain. It's a good thing I came along when I did. Your clothes are wet," he smiled then as he continued. "But I wrapped you in my jacket."

It felt warm around her. "Thank you," she whispered.

"I'd better get you home," he said. "Where do you live?"

Jessie tried to piece together an answer to that question, but she could not remember. "I don't know."

"What's your name?"

"Jessie," she said ... evenly, assuredly.

"Well, Jessie," he began, glancing up, then down at her face again. "I have an apartment a few blocks away. I'll take you there, and you can dry off. if that's alright with you, I mean."

Jessie smiled. "Of course it's alright," she said, and he lifted her fragile body into his arms and carried her without stopping, and without any strain, out of the park and across the street, past several blocks of half-lit apartment buildings, up two flights of stairs, through his door, and finally set her gently onto his bed.

Tom awoke with a start and saw from his uncomfortable position on the sofa Jessie walking towards the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked, blinking.

"To work," she said.

"Will I see you again?" He sat up and rubbed his arm in attempt to circulate the blood there.

"Of course," she said, matter-of-factly. "I'll be back this afternoon."

"But, today's Sunday," said Tom as if the fact were in question.

"I know. I have some decorating to do. I'm moving into a new office."

"Oh, where?"

Jessie looked across the room, and saw out the window a yawning city, red light filtering through the maze of buildings, shadowed by an ominous tower, standing proudly in the distance.

She looked back at Tom, who was sitting half-awake on the edge of the sofa, and she replied: "On the top of the world."