

OCCURRENCE AT A CORNER

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Wanda stood at the corner. Cars...trucks...cars...buses...cars.... She wanted to cross the street, but her feet felt stuck. The complex of pedestrians, fat vans, bikes, even reflections off windshields and car mirrors caused her to squint and step away from the curb, in a bow to dizziness. No, she wouldn't dare venture across. She had been taking a brief stroll after work, trying to do something healthy, and instead, this vertigo is what had happened.

Wanda leaned against a storefront in order to stand upright. She knew herself to be a bit overweight, but having her body betray her like this struck her as ridiculous. She frowned at herself, at the image in her head of her fleshy figure. She breathed in deeply, hoping more oxygen to her brain and lunges was all she needed. But fumes rushed into her nose. She coughed.

"Are you alright?" a lady stopped and asked her.

As if in slow motion, Wanda sensed her neck moving her face in order to face this woman. "Ill be okay in a minute," she heard herself answer. She noticed the woman's designer sun glasses, how they were the precise shade of the lady's lipstick: a mellow purple, an uncommon color for make up. Wanda gazed intently at the woman--staring at something or someone took away some of her dizziness--and figured the lady lived in this

neighborhood they stood in, this part-residential, part business area, with its dog water fountains, miniature evergreens and relief sculptures above and around window frames.

"Do you want me to call a taxi for you," the lady asked. She appeared to be a woman in her late forties--only a few years younger than Wanda.

"I can manage."

"Really, it's no trouble."

"I said I'm okay."

"If you say so, but you don't look like...like you can function," the woman said, stepping back, as if now she felt a bit leery of Wanda, this sick stranger with her head slumped forward.

"I don't live anywhere near here, so a cab is out of the question," Wanda said in her civil, receptionist voice, the intonation she used at work. The idea that she had money enough to take a taxi home, the notion that she lived close enough to consider that option, annoyed Wanda. When wealthy people assumed everyone else's life was as easy as their life was, Wanda's neck tightened in irritation.

"It's clear that you can't go home alone. In your condition. If you don't mind, I'll call an ambulance." The lady's words, her tone, rang with the politeness Wanda believed rich people used when interacting with people they didn't know.

"There's a diner about a four minutes walk south of here. I'll go there, order some tea or soup. That's all I need."

Wanda took a few steps. She knew if she reached Park Avenue, she wouldn't be far from Lexington Avenue. Then, when she arrived at Lexington and trudged southward for a few minutes, the diner would appear: a heaven, a haven.

The woman gazed at Wanda with a caring expression, a concern so intense it bordered on the spiritual. Then, as Wanda toddled toward the next avenue, the woman tread along beside this weak, shaking stranger who was dressed neatly in a navy coat that was maybe too heavy for the weather. First, Park Avenue: wide, intimidating in its solidity, at least to Wanda. Then Lexington: narrow in a way that made it appear quaint, from another era. Lexington: an Avenue Wanda liked, the way a person might feel comfortable with someone who was attractive without being ostentatious about it. The two women strode; they tottered. The woman's concern felt like a sun, a ray that exhibited a strong touch and yet maintained a calmness. Wanda sensed in herself a warmth toward this lady. This feeling sprang into Wanda without her being aware of when exactly it had arrived. The kindness being shown to Wanda enveloped the two women in a nimbus. A sensation of shame swept over Wanda for having resisted this lady at first. She had behaved like a person rejecting her angel.

They arrived at the diner. Wanda experienced sweat forming in the part that separated her black hair into two symmetrical halves. "Here we are," she said to the lady, using her chummy voice, a tone she rarely used. "Thank you."

"I hope you feel better," the lady said as she turned to leave.

"Why don't you come in with me? Have a bowl of soup or something?" Wanda asked. She smiled at the lady and stepped toward her.

"Well, I--"

"If you really want me to feel better. If you really care...you'll stay with me, for a meal." Wanda noticed the woman blinked more than most people. A habit that lent glamour to the lady, accented her makeup.

"Oh, if you insist," the woman said.

After a pause--a pleasant, polite rest in the conversation, like a fermata in music--she pushed the diner's door open for Wanda.

The smell of hot food--onion rings, veggie burgers, mashed potatoes--hit Wanda at once and the sensation was comforting, even invigorating. Strolling into the eatery, Wanda had never felt so at peace with herself, nor so at ease with a stranger.