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Abstract

I was out with my two dogs and walking back to my house with the Sunday paper when I noticed three loosely tied black plastic garbage bags on the bench of the concrete island at the end of my street. The blue pants leg of a pair of jeans and the sleeve of a gray sweater stuck out of one bag. Wind scraped falling leaves against the bench. One of the bags moved.

Keywords

homeless, dialogue, charity

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November 23, 2012

The Girl on the Bench

An Essay by J. Malcolm Garcia

I was out with my two dogs and walking back to my house with the Sunday paper when I noticed three loosely tied black plastic garbage bags on the bench of the concrete island at the end of my street. The blue pants leg of a pair of jeans and the sleeve of a gray sweater stuck out of one bag. Wind scraped falling leaves against the bench. One of the bags moved.

A teenage girl shifted from beneath the pile and pulled the hood of her black sweatshirt low over her forehead. She crossed her arms and shivered. She lit a cigarette and peered at me out of the corner of her eye. It was still dark, although a thin blue layer of pink morning sky had broken the horizon. Her cigarette flared orange. She exhaled and drew her knees to her chest, and the bags shifted around her legs. My dogs dragged me toward her, and I tugged them back. I'd taken them for a walk to a nearby Hen House supermarket where I'd stopped to buy the paper. Until I saw the girl, I had been alone with my dogs, unhindered. I wanted to keep it that way and read the paper, drink some coffee, be by myself.

You OK? I said.

She rested her head against her knees and ignored me. Fine, I thought, I tried. I walked to my house and didn't look back, and thought that ended it.

The dogs pushed past me as we entered the kitchen through the garage. Sunlight angled past the breakfast nook table and splayed across two cactus plants and a fern that my ex had left behind. I closed the shades to keep the emerging light out of my eyes and tossed the paper on the counter. I fed the dogs and made coffee. I poured myself a cup, opened the paper, flipped through it without focus and put it down. I contemplated the kitchen floor, drumming my fingers against the counter, keeping time to the ceiling fan. I felt the dogs watching me. I looked out the window and tried to see the girl, but a parked car blocked my view. I stared at the car to will it away, and then I gave up.

Shit.

I set aside the paper and poured coffee into a plastic Kansas City Chiefs cup. The dogs followed me as I grabbed two granola bars from a cookie jar and walked out the door.

Stay, I told them.

I shut the door behind me and walked to the island.

Breakfast, I told the girl.

She raised her head, hesitated, then reached for the coffee. Her face was smudged with dirt. Chipped red polish covered her fingernails. Sixteen, seventeen. Maybe eighteen. She wouldn't look at me. She took the cup, held it in both hands under her nose, and inhaled.

You all right?

She nodded.

Sure?

Another nod.

You talk?

She hesitated.

Yes.

How long have you been here?

I spent the night.

She blew on the coffee. A car drove toward us, circled the island, and continued up the street.

You have a place to go?

My godmother's. But she acts pretty crazy and I left there last night.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. I needed more coffee. I was annoyed the girl had intruded on my morning and annoyed with myself for letting her. What's your name? I thought. Where're your parents? I didn't ask. I wondered how she could be this alone.

You have no one to call?

No.

You're all by yourself?

Yes.

Not anybody? Even to talk to?

I offered my cell phone.

No, thank you.

She pressed a hand to her stomach.

Excuse me.

I gave her the granola bars.

Coffee on an empty stomach, I said.

It's strong.

That's how I make it.

I didn't say it's bad.

I didn't say you did.

She peeled the wrapper off a granola bar, crumpled it in her hand, and looked for somewhere to toss it.

Here, I said.

I threw it in a trash bin at the end of the island, satisfied that in addition to giving her coffee and granola bars I could do that for her too. The car came back and drove by again, but slowly. A woman leaned out the window. She seemed concerned. She parked, got out with her purse, and approached the girl.

I'm sorry for your misfortune, she said, handing her a twenty-dollar bill.

The girl took it, her mouth open in surprise. She held it up to the sky as if to see if it was real. Then she put it in her pocket.

Thank you.

May God bless you.

The woman smiled and turned to me.

May God bless you, she said, and offered me ten dollars.

No, thank you, I said. I'm OK. I'm fine. I live here.

Oh, she said, and took a step back.

I had on an old blue sweatshirt, torn jeans, and sandals. I hadn't showered yet. My hair and beard, I knew, could use a comb. The woman dropped the money in her purse, got in her car, and gave me one last look before pulling away from the curb. I watched her leave, listening to the fading sound of the car engine until I no longer heard it. I felt as if the world had stopped leaving me alone on the planet with just this stranger, this girl.

I must look pretty rough, I said.

The girl smiled and I smiled too, and then I reminded myself that the day was short. I had nothing planned, but I wanted it to myself.

You sure you don't want to call someone?

No.

You're going to attract some attention.

I'll be all right.

OK. Good luck.

The girl thrust the coffee cup at me.

No. Finish it. You can keep the cup.

Thank you.

I walked back to the house, sat in the kitchen, and tried reading the paper. iPads, a headline read, were redefining medicine. I closed the paper. I didn't know of any homeless shelters. Was she eligible for one? What were the requirements to get in? Which ones were open on Sunday? And what if she didn't want to go? What if she did? How would she get there? I didn't want her to have expectations. Not of me. I was getting used to being alone. I needed to stay in the house and read the paper.

If I waited long enough, I knew someone else would deal with her. People would come out of their houses in bathrobes to retrieve the morning paper from their driveway and be disturbed by the sight of a strange girl with three trash bags of clothes. Someone would call the police.

I opened the paper again. Governor Pardons Political Ally, a headline read. The alarm on my watch buzzed. I switched it off and stared at the paper without reading.

Shit.

I picked up the phone.

She's not causing any problem, I told the police dispatcher. But I think she needs help.

White, black, what?

White.

Age?

Mid- to late teens, I'd guess.

Juvenile?

I'd assume.

And you think she's been out there all night?

That's what she said.

We'll go by and check it out.

Like I said, she's not causing a problem. I had no idea, really, who to call.

I understand.

I'd appreciate it if you kept my name out of it.

The dispatcher hung up. I poured another cup of coffee. After a while, I went outside and saw two squad cars parked at the island. I couldn't see the girl. I stood behind a tree in case she could see me. I felt I had let her down somehow. Neighbors looked out their doors. I walked back inside and finished my coffee and skimmed the paper once more. Insurgents had struck again in Afghanistan. Housing sales rose for the third straight month. The price of gas was expected to increase by five cents a gallon.

I pushed the paper away. The ceiling fan creaked. My dogs barked, and I told them to be quiet. I heard people parking their cars at a church behind my house, and I listened to the echo of their steps on the pavement. I didn't know them but I recognized them after seeing them Sunday after Sunday, week after week, month after month. I put a slice of bread in the toaster and scrambled an egg. I wasn't really hungry.

When I finished my breakfast, I showered and got in my car to run errands. Unload

some plastic bottles at the recycling center, buy food for the coming week. Nothing special. Maybe stop at the library and check out a book. I wondered what my ex was doing. I thought of the girl and then tried not to.

I backed out of the driveway. The police had left, and my neighbors had all gone inside. The island stood empty, and there was no trace of her except for my Chiefs cup, which she or the police had left on the bench. I stopped and threw it away, and then she was gone completely.

J. Malcolm Garcia's work has appeared in *Best American Travel Writing*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Missouri Review*, *McSweeney's*, and *The Oxford American*, among others.

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