

The Wanderers

The store was teeming with people. They jostled through the aisles, tense eyes focused as they scanned.

He was only in need of several items. Essentials, really. The sounds of the crowd barely emerged onto the edge of his consciousness. There is a certain state in which one belongs to the world and yet is closed off from it, in which one is part of the chaos while impervious to it, to all but the struggle within, the concerns that pulse constantly, the weight of so heavy a burden.

The two carts collided without warning. The impact was not enough to shake his footing, but she stumbled, and dropped the load of cans carefully cradled in her arms.

"Watch where you're going," she hissed. She'd intended for the comment to be internal, but knew at once that it hadn't been.

He frowned at the floor beneath him, allowing a moment too long to pass before action. "Let me get those." He didn't have time for this, but he'd help her anyway. Why were these places always so busy? It was only the afternoon.

The woman nodded appreciatively and said nothing until the cans were piled neatly in her grocery cart. "In a rush?" she asked casually.

The words stunned him. Because wasn't everybody? In a rush, that is. What was anything, anywhere, really, but a transition? A movement from one place to the next. Especially here. "I guess I am," he responded dully.

She wished she could agree. If life were full of things and people, perhaps the loneliness would leave her. She'd given up on asking for so many hopeless dreams; was it too much to ask merely for distractions?

The window which they faced allowed a sudden stream of sunshine. He hadn't noticed the window at all until the brightness made him blink. There were people outside, a man and a woman, walking aimlessly, laughing, talking, smiling, holding hands. Where were they going? He wondered if they knew.

She had noticed too. "They're not in a rush." It was stupid thing to say. But regret always came when it was too late. First impressions had formed her. No one saw past them. No one

saw more. She began to push her cart away, to escape again from sight and notice. It seemed invisibility was both a blessing and a curse. She longed for it to lift, and yet, during those flickering moments of light she dreamed of darkness.

There was something so tantalising about that freedom. He saw it. It was something so small, so insignificant, but he wanted it more than reason could account for. He wanted escape. It wasn't love he wanted, and for one fleeting second it wasn't success for which he yearned. As he stared through the grimy window that seemed to lead out of himself, he wanted only to be aimless. He wanted to wander.

She watched as he strode away from his cart, which remained abandoned in the aisle. She knew nothing of him, not enough to ask, but curiosity could not bend to restraint. "Where are you going?" Another woman pushed past her and she moved closer to the nearest shelf to keep out of the way.

"I'm going for a walk." His eyes wrinkled slightly as he smiled. She nodded again, but he had not finished speaking. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Yes."

"Alright then."

"Okay."

The doors slid open before them and the sunlight was strong enough that they had to strain before it. "Where are we going?"

He looked as though he were about to laugh. "I don't know," he said.

They continued on in silence, but she let him lead the way. Cars passed and they walked beside them on sidewalks that seemed theirs alone.

At last the sidewalk merged with trail. From pavement smooth to clouds of dirt and little stones that rolled as they came underfoot. The trees offered temporary relief from the heat of the sun. She was watching him. He watched the trees.

"Why are we here?" she asked him.

"I don't know why you're here," he said, and her cheeks went red. "I didn't mean it that way." They approached a small park bench, wood chipping, paint peeling, a lonely witness to the sounds of joy and squeals of delight as children laughed and played mere feet away. "I don't really know why I'm here. It might have been something you said." His mind felt light, but he couldn't be sure how much to share, and words had not yet access to his thoughts.

"What? When I told you to watch where you were going?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. That wasn't it."

A sparrow landed in the grass and hopped closer to them before fluttering its wings again. She sat down and he stood a moment longer before joining her.

"You thought I was in a rush."

"Well, you *looked* like you were in a rush."

"I know. I was." He paused. "Were you?"

She wanted to say yes. She wished time wasn't always filled with waiting. "No."

"No?"

"Sometimes I feel like I don't have anywhere to go." Her words had taken over better sense again. She focused on a single blade of grass in order to avoid his gaze.

"Why does there have to be anywhere to go?"

He stood up and she followed, as they wound their way through the trees and onto pavement again. He could see her thinking. He wasn't sure of what. But she had a story; all she needed was someone to tell. The store loomed again in sight.

"My car..." he started.

"I took the bus."

"Aren't you going back inside?"

"Are you?"

"No."

"Me neither."

She turned from him and then turned back to offer the traces of a smile. "Thanks."

"For running into you?"

"Yeah. For that."

He disappeared from sight before she could think of something better to say. They were different, but somehow she felt as though they were the same. Somehow there had been something special about wandering that sunlit path. She didn't even know his name, but he had heard her.

And for some strange reason she had finally heard herself.

The sun was beating down and she welcomed the light. Light, which exposes everything and everyone beneath its piercing gaze. She basked in it. The street was not a sentence. It led her somewhere, to a place she did not know, to a dream she had not forged and a future not yet lost.

So she followed it.