

# Move Along, Gentleman

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October 13, 2021



She works for a Chinese family in a modest-serious restaurant specializing in buffets of Sushi. It's temporary, for sure. Her apron waits expectantly, like a boxer's towel, to be thrown into the hospitality ring. Minimum wage. Student gratuity. He wants better for her than *this*. Their battling at present, he's fully aware, is his fault. Or rather, he should say, the fault of circumstances that he's unwittingly allowed to come about.

For now, and until things improve, he walks her to work late mornings and meets her again at closing time, nearing midnight. They take the long walk to and from the Chinese restaurant together. He takes the long walks from and to her work, by himself, regrets and theories intermingling in his mind each time. While she's serving tables, he's in the library and computer labs at the University of Cape Town, whacking away indefatigably determined - but becoming desperate - to finish an altogether too ambitious thesis on 'authentic' literary realism, intersecting, listen to this: Semiology, Psychoanalysis, Marxism and Decolonial theory. A ridiculous endeavour . . . especially seeing as how they've recently been evicted from their home, saved by a Catholic priest from homelessness, and because it's the long summer holidays, he's not contracted for first year tutoring or giving third year seminars and, therefore, is not earning anything. The usually busy university-serving restaurants are themselves empty at this time of year, with the students and staff on holiday, tips are scarce.

They live simply. Poverty, after all, still has its gradations to prevent. In their present situation, it's only her buoying them. He feels this, feels it terribly. But she has at least found work, that's good, and the late-night fortune cookies she surprises him with promise better times ahead: "Some days you are pigeon, some days you are statue. Today, bring an umbrella".

His phone, under pressure to obey Murphy's law, has given up. More than anything else, this means that one of them is forced to always wait for the other. He worries mainly about her waiting around

for him late at night, on the street after work, by herself. He's always early.

There's a late-night, student-gear, fast food franchise right next door to the Chinese Sushi restaurant, the type of mega-franchise you find all over the world. They never buy anything from here - a cheap ice-cream now and then - comfort for the umbrella days. Okay, don't tell, but she buys a small burger with fries after the lunch rush and hasn't told him that she doesn't get fed at the restaurant. But he's guessed this already. He can tell by her hunger after work and so, he makes them a late-night dinner in the kitchen of the lost souls' commune where the priest has let them live, rent free, with four other young homeless people - two other students, another waiter, and one franchise kitchen staff worker - but only for the holidays.

As he passes by, he sees that the always busy burger franchise is especially empty for a Friday night. There are, however, five drunken and boisterous businessmen inside. They make him think of what colonial administrators must have been like. Well fed, aggressive, nonplussed by anything but their businesses and family. They are not his concern.

He makes his way past, step-one-two-three, eager to see her through the Chinese restaurant window. As always, that is to say eleven years always, she gives her wholehearted smile when she sees him. Tonight though, there's something else in her bright smile. Something more than her quick words to him through the closed front door that she opens briefly.

"I'm sorry darling, there's a problem with the cash-up. People were taking from the buffet at lunch time and then giving it to other people, we were really busy today!" She smiles. She's glad. She's made more than is the usual holiday pittance for her troubles. "It'll just take a little while. I'm really sorry," she's concerned, knowing that he'll now need to wait longer than usual for her.

"It's fine darling, no stress. I'll wait outside," he says calmly. The owners don't like him waiting inside. They've not said anything directly but their unease has been clear enough. He can do without the sharp looks.

He'll stand, as usual, just out of view. In any case, he enjoys playing the *flaneur* whenever he needs to wait. Massive national brewery trucks rumble past to deliver high alcohol content beer all over the country. Upstairs from her work, there's a club that spans the entire length of the building's structure, also of Chinese propriety. Always busy. Always filled with bantering, pool, music. The continuous hip hop from the club's jukebox is blasting. Bass vibrates through everything. He stands, quite still in the frenetic, and watches people, cars, taxis and trucks pass him by. Watches amused, irritated, remembering.

The main street of Rondebosch reminds him of all the other city centres that they've lived in through their struggles. Too many moments, most unremembered. Some stay with him though. Some won't go away. "Memories are stone, and heavy", he remembers reading in a poem. As he turns, more and more into a sponge for it all, he relaxes and the stones come back to him with their immovable weight. But there's a lot going on outside her restaurant tonight, none is able to take substantial form.

A skinny, ragged looking man with dishevelled clothing, tattered back-pack and a blue peak cap, oddly similar to his own, comes jangling up to him. The beggar makes him uncomfortable, that is to say, not the man directly so much as the way the man makes him feel - his tentative, for now, remove from where this other person is in life. Only their caps are the same, he reminds himself. He's seen this homeless man before. The homeless man's eyes flash recognition too.

"Small change, please?" the beggar begs.

He shakes his head as a statement that he doesn't have any to spare, the truth, which of course is not believed.

"Anything, please?" he whines.

He considers. Believes angels are amongst us. Takes out a lonely coin he'd kept for possible ice-cream, but because she's made money today, hands it over.

"Thanks."

"Cool dude," and a nod.

A young, small and thin woman and a middle-aged equally small man, having exited the club upstairs, stop *very* near to him. He shuffles slightly away. The girl has a floppy white hat with yellowish stains on it. With her back to him he's not able to see her face.

"Buy me something to eat," she asks.

"I didn't bring my card," the man replies in a foreign accent.

"Don't you have any money?" she inquires.

"My card is in der car," he explains, smiling.

"Go and fetch it," she demands.

"Where do you live?" he asks, ignoring her and smiling broadly.

She tells him Rosebank. A little way away. Rent is expensive there, he knows, and individual rooms are usually gobbled-up by foreign students from the US and Europe. She must live in the student residence, which at this time of year, would be empty. Why hasn't she gone home for the holidays, he wonders?

"Buy me something to eat," she starts again, "I'm hungry".

"I don't have money," still the smile.

"You don't have any money? Not even on your card?" She's incredulous but more than that, disappointed.

"Can I come with you home?" the man asks.

He's taken aback that they're having this conversation as near to him as they are. It's as if he'd become invisible. Their negotiation makes him uncomfortable but he stands his ground, was here first, has a purpose in standing here, but still . . . turns his head away, tries to dislodge from the unintentional eavesdropping.

On the other side, one of the businessmen, huge with his formal suit shirt coming untucked, exits the fast-food franchise onto the pavement, altogether enjoying himself - happy. The beggar, who had been loitering and looking around, approaches Mr. Happy. The businessman's face immediately becomes serious and hostile. He looks at the beggar and then faces forward again in pretend interest across the street, no doubt weighing their threat. He thinks that the businessman probably considers him a beggar too. A new kind of blue peak-capped gang of desperate people who loiter outside fast food franchises the world over. The businessman flatly ignores the beggar and turns to

watch his colleagues inside. Non-entities. Of no consequence. Not worth his time.

“Don’t tink I’m rude,” the foreigner with the student is saying, “Dat is just de way us Jamaicans are. Even Bob Marley was rude. If you go Jamaica you will see dis is true.”

He’s surprised that the man claims to be Jamaican. His accent is not Jamaican. The man says, “Bob Marley” with a type of pride. Resorting now, perhaps, to some warped way of marijuana-induced reasoning to impress her.

“I lost my phone,” the student says to herself, softly, wryly.

“Can I sleep your place?” the foreigner asks.

“I don’t even know you,” she says bluntly.

“So?”

“No. I have to go. I’m tired,” she turns him down. “Thanks for the evening.”

“Are you sure?” he asks once more. Always that chance. “I can give you a ride.”

“No. I have to go. Bye.” It’s final. She turns and walks away. Mr. Jamaica watches her walk away, Mr. Beggar watches her walk away, he watches her walk away. The foreigner clicks his tongue and turns to go back inside the club. Will she go to bed hungry tonight? *He follows the man inside, orders a beer, takes a swig and then smashes the rest of the bottle over his head. All the other men in the club applaud on behalf of all other chivalrous men, everywhere.*

The businessman’s colleagues and a youngster, a student, each with packets containing their burgers in-hand have come outside to join Mr. Happy on the pavement. The beggar still stands hovering just out of reach.

One of the colleagues continues his conversation with the student, letting Mr. Happy in on it:

“No bru! It must be tight,” the man is laughing, “Ja. The tighter the better”.

“I don’t agree,” retorts the student, the same educated English as the young woman from a moment before. “If it’s bigger you have more to hold onto, it’s just better.”

“Nonsense! Jirra, how can you say shit like that?” says Mr. Happy, joining in on the terrible banter: “It’s like throwing a fucking sausage down a blerry corridor”.

The colleagues all laugh. Mr. Happy laughs: “If the ass is big you can’t flippin’ feel it man. And big asses are sweaty. The ass needs to be tight so that you can feel it more.”

“Whoa! Too much for me,” the student walks away shaking his head.

A colleague points across the road and they all turn to watch a group of young foreign female students, dressed for a night out in an array of colour. One of the businessmen whistles piercingly. In return, one of the women from the group throws a dismissive middle finger into the air without looking back.

The men walk past him and burst out into raucous laughter but he doesn’t hear this particular remark. He’s glad that he didn’t. Their joking is like a machine making grating sounds to him. *He goes after them, taps Mr. Happy on the shoulder, and as the big man turns around, he slaps him in*

*the face with a white glove. That gets all of their attention. The bass from the club stops. The brewery trucks stop. The group of young women stop. They all watch as he and Mr. Happy face each other at a distance on the main street. Everything is still. The tension mounts. The big man draws his gun but in a flash a shot goes off - the bullet striking Mr. Happy in the heart. He sinks to his knees, shocked, falls on his face. Everyone watching applauds, except the colleagues, who walk away, heads bowed, cussing between themselves and vowing revenge.*

A large stone falls into place out on my horizon. They made a clop-clop-clop sound as the heels hit the pavement. I'd spent the earlier part of the Tuesday night hanging around an empty club, drinking beer, nothing special, just beers with the boys after work. I needed to meet her afterwards, where she managed a retro bar that was busy on weekends but quiet during the week. I'd been absorbed by the clapping sound of my boots when I turned the corner.

"You scum! You filthy fucking scum!" a man was shouting at a woman, holding her by the hair, slapping her through the face.

"Stop it! Stop it!" I heard my girlfriend shouting from the doorway, *her patrons, men included, were merely looking on, immobile, spectators. Why were none of them helping?*

I ran up and pushed the man away. He stumbled backwards, righted himself, locked eyes with me - stone eyes.

"Just you wait!" the man shouted, before running into an apartment block next door to the bar. The woman who had been the recipient of the violence was crying and a friend of hers came over, offering consolation. *Everyone else just looked on.*

I was about to go over to my love when, as if in a nightmare, the man returned, *running at me with a panga in his hand. A panga! Near as long as my arm.* I hadn't expected this. It wasn't what takes place in reality. *The man launched himself at me, swinging full.* Something old, something awful, a thing primeval between men awakened in the space between the two of us in that moment and I moved without thought to my left, feeling the slow-motion *whoosh* of the blade go past my throat. The feeling of death palpable through my mind, I lost balance, the heels of the boots slipping off the concrete and sending me crashing onto the pavement. The man had swung with such might through emptiness that he ended up throwing himself full and hard onto the asphalt of the street. I stood, shaking, saw that the murderous intent had been knocked out of his sails as he too stood, looked around as if unsure of where he was, or what was happening, and then ran back into the building. I watched him go. *They all watched him go.*

Shocked and frightened, my love came over to me and saw that there was blood on my right hand from a nasty scrape. She begged me to come inside. But my own adrenaline was up and I stared intently at the doorway of the building, unsure of whether or not the lunatic would return, sensing though, in the quick unfurling minutes, that it was over.

A taxi driver who'd been watching the scene from his car walked up to us, "Jissus! That guy nearly chopped your fucking head off bru! I've never seen anything like that! Holy shit!"

Then, as if returning to the same nightmare after having woken, the woman who the man had been beating began shouting at me, over and over again, "This is *your* fault! It's *your* fucking fault!"

I thought that she too would now try to assault me but her friend, thank goodness, succeeded in coaxing her away. *Everyone, dumbfounded by the accusation, baffled by this development, could only stare.*

A few minutes later, a cop car stopped in-front of us. I went up to the passenger window.

"Where is the man?"

"In that building!"

"Well," said the cop after a pause, "We can't go knock on every door, can we? Have you been drinking, sir?"

"I had a few beers."

"Go home!"

They were cowboy boots. Clop-clop-clop. I'd been wearing cowboy boots in a city centre. That was also not the real thing to have been doing.

The lights of the Chinese restaurant have been turned off. The beggar has disappeared but he doesn't remember seeing him leave. She comes out with a fellow waiter from Zimbabwe, all smiles and happiness, bringing the gentle back into his life.

"I'm so sorry to keep you waiting," she says, looking earnestly at him for signs of annoyance. Seeing his smile, she gives him a big hug.

"It's alright," he reassures her. "I was watching the wildlife."

"Really?" she asks.

"Yes, I saw a snake and some hyenas. But I roared and chased them away."

She suggests buying them an ice-cream, before the long walk home together, but only if he promises to show her this roar of his.

He thinks of adding a chapter on gender-based violence to his thesis, but he needs to finish, get her out of dodge.

*Without pigeon, only statues. Take umbrella everywhere.*

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