

“New is Good”

I awoke, confused anger taking hold of me. Memory quickly swept the confusion away. Despair flooded in, taking its place. It threatened to overwhelm me. Like it always did. I squeezed my eyes shut, clenched my hands into fists, went fully rigid. I stifled a moan. Most days, this was the hardest part. It passed quickly this time. Like it usually does. Not always, but usually.

I unclenched my hands, relaxed my arms and legs, lowered my back's arch. I took in a few calming breaths and stretched myself out in the bed, releasing some of the tension. Some of it. Never all of it. As I did, I cataloged every whispering sound, the feel of the sheets as they slid across my legs, the coolness of the room, the refrigerator's dying sigh - these and the thirty-four other small details my obsession required of me.

A minute, or more precisely fifty-six seconds later, I opened my eyes.

“You're wasting time. If you want to meet someone new, you better get moving.”

She was right.

I rolled out of bed, pulled my eyes away from the ceiling, refusing to count the eighty full tiles and eight partial tiles on the ceiling's far wall. As I dressed, I asked her.

“How did it go yesterday? Can you predict when the official performances begin?” I asked, without looking at her.

“Yesterday was an improvement. Henri still stumbles with his Russian and he's really struggling with the accent. Portia has been off with her timing lately. She's hasn't been a problem, but I hope it doesn't mean she's losing interest. We have a half dozen backups, of course, but we've all invested so much, it would be a shame to lose her now, when we're so close.”

“How many of you spoke Russian before you started?”

“None. That was a requirement. We actually caught Alex out, though I don't know how he thought he would get away with it. His last name is Pavlov, after all.”

As she spoke, I moved around the room, dressing, multi-tasking as I went, saving as many seconds now so as to maximize time for tonight.

“Optimistically,” she continued, “five or six more months should do it. Worst case, a year.”

The thought of learning Russian did not kindle much interest in me. However, I knew I'd regret it if I did not.

“That's quite soon. I should start learning it now, then.”

“You should. Start coming to rehearsals now, use our books. We hardly use them any more, except for Henri. Get ahead of the rush.”

“I'll do that,” I said.

I would skip brushing my hair and teeth today.

“I'm just about ready. I'm going to run upstairs and grab Sean's sneakers in case Karan needs his. I should have made arrangements, but Karan has been in zombie mode for a while now.”

I opened the door to the hallway and she said, “good luck, husband.”

I turned and looked back at her.
“Thank you, wife.”

* * *

I pulled the door shut, listening for the click as the lock engaged. I turned left down the hall, took the stairs two at a time and exited to the fourth floor. I was breathing heavily when I got to the top. I quashed the urge to catch my breath.

I jogged down the hallway and heard a loud bang from 410. Jerry, checking out.

I flinched but did not slow down.

I arrived at Sean and Kelly’s door and entered the unlocked apartment.

My eyes scanned the silent studio. It was spotless. Kelly had left cat care and feeding instructions written in her neat, perfect script on the small dining room table. I could only vaguely remember what the cat looked like any more - a black and white tuxedo. I gave in to my obsession and scanned the note again.

Felix. The cat’s name was Felix.

Twelve steps brought me to the closet door. I leaned down and grabbed Sean’s sneakers as I opened it in one fluid motion. They were a half size too large but better too large than too small or wet, like mine were downstairs in the washer. As I left, my eyes took in the large poster of the Eiffel Tower on their door.

“I hope you guys made it,” I whispered.

I jogged back to the stairs and ran down the thirty-six steps to the second floor as fast as I dared.

I exited to the hallway and seventeen steps later I stood in front of Karan’s apartment. I rapped at his door, hard. A moment later, “yes?”

“Sneakers?” I yelled.

A brief pause.

“Sure.”

I waited fifty, then sixty, then sixty-six seconds. He opened the door, sneakers in hand. He made no movement to hand them to me.

“Thank you. I’m trying to meet someone new today,” I said, reaching out with my hand.

“Good luck,” he said in a monotone voice, eyes staring vacantly. “Share later?”

“Yes, always,” I replied.

He nodded in reply. His eyes briefly touched mine before looking away.

I dropped Sean’s shoes since I wouldn’t need them. I ran back to the stairs, listening for but not hearing Karan shut his door. I sat down, slipping into Karan’s sneakers. They fit as perfectly as they always did.

This small success buoyed my spirits considerably. Tomorrow, I might risk coming to him first, save a trip to the fourth floor, now that he knew what I was doing.

I was outside and unlocking my bike from the rack less than two minutes later. I jumped on it and began heading north on Birch. No one lived in range to the south and north was the flattest terrain in the aggregate. I would get further that way.

At first, the roads were empty. I passed more large apartment complexes like my own, some with first floors given over to retail stores. Cars sat silent and useless on the side of the road. The wind's whispering sound was my only companion.

Soon enough, people trickled out to the streets, some with evident great purpose, like me. Others wandered out, shuffling along slowly or simply standing watching with eerie, vacant eyes.

I rode along this way for a while, pacing myself. I had many hours ahead of me, just under sixteen, in fact. I was going to be sore and hurt long before then.

As I rode, one face stood out from the crowd of shiftless dozens I had passed. Seeing her filled me with a vague dread. I debated with myself and decided. I stopped near her. "Dr. Visken!" I yelled. "Why aren't you at the school?"

She looked up at me and approached quickly. Her smile, the alert look on her face calmed my nerves.

"Look at you! It's been years since I saw you. It's all OK, we're taking a break."

"A break?" I asked, confusion and dread flooding in once again. "Why?"

"Oh, it's fine. We've reached an impasse of sorts. Tempers are running a bit short. Some of us have been getting sarcastic toward each other. Dr. Evans suggested a timeout and we agreed. It's nice to remind myself of people again, it's been a long time."

He had no response to that. He'd been wanting to ask one of them a question, but the protocols to get to their person were so complicated now, he hadn't been able to summon the energy to learn them. Now that he had this opportunity, he had to take it. He approached it delicately.

"I listened from the auditorium for a few weeks a while ago. I tried to follow but I am too far behind."

"It's a struggle even for us. Proofs on top of proofs. We go down one path and hit a dead end. We back up and find out we'd made an earlier mistake. Sometimes, we forget and have to do a proof all over again. And unlike your wife's Romeo and Juliet, we don't have a script to follow. We have to invent new math all the time."

"They're doing Macbeth now, actually. Romeo was a pretty long time ago."

"Really? Did I miss it? How sad. When do they do Macbeth then, officially?"

"She thinks less than a year."

"Wonderful, I'll make a note to remember that."

"It's in Russian."

"Oh, really? I knew Russian once. It should come back to me with little study."

"They have books..." I said, trailing off. Of course she knew that, where to get her own.

"May I ask ..."

She interrupted me before I could finish my question.

"No," she said, sighing. "We don't know. A few years ago, we thought ... I thought we might be close. But it was a dead end again. I hope this break helps reset our perspective."

"How long will you be on break?"

"A few numbers were thrown about. A year, maybe a few. No more than ten."

"I hope it helps. We all do," I said.

"The work has never stopped, has it? We will pick up again. Where are you headed?" she asked.

Her words lit a storm of anxiety. This was taking too long.

I stood up on the bike and pedaled furiously. I yelled over my shoulder, "I'm trying to meet someone new today!"

"Good luck!" she yelled back. "Be sure to share!"

* * *

I was soon beyond the high school, so close to Dr. Visken's home. In fifteen minutes I was by the airport and on the small highway leading to Lumbersville. I did not travel this route as often as others but after a few hundred trips, the road give up all its secrets - it's bumps and potholes, the patches of loose gravel and oil slicks. The wind picked up right on time and ominous clouds appeared to the west, taunting me. It had been so long since I experienced rain. A few people - Dan, Maria, Shouirya, Anelis - claimed they could make it to the clouds and experience the rain. I believed them. The joy in their faces when they talked about the experience brooked no doubt in my mind.

Their story always made me wonder, as I did now - how did the rain-soaked citizenry out west feel about their never-ending days of rain? Or at least, I tried to summon up true curiosity about it. It was too far for most of us to experience personally and no time to talk once there. All we had ever managed was endless speculation and that had run its course a long time ago.

* * *

Hour after hour passed.

My once-expensive bike held up well as always. It chewed through the miles efficiently and did not contribute to my growing worry over the time. I shouldn't have stopped to speak to Dr. Visken. I could have saved five minutes or more if I'd just gone to Karan's room first. What if that cost me a chance today?

Exhaustion, discomfort and eventually outright pain drove these thoughts and emotions from me. I passed through Lumbersville, continued through Regalsville. I struggled and ended up walking my bike up the long uphill stretch to the entrance of "canyon alley," three miles cut through the Mooney hills.

Half way through, I saw someone in the distance, on the ground surrounded by a heap of rope and rock. When I got close enough, I saw it was a woman. A man was eighty or ninety feet high, clinging to the cliff face, slowly working his way to the summit.

She was still breathing, somehow, when I pulled up beside her. Her arm wrapped behind her body at an impossible angle. Blood pooled around her head. She was breathing heavily and unevenly. She heard me come and moaned something unintelligible through a mouth and jaws that had suffered terrible damage.

A voice from above. Male.

"Do the needful?" he asked.

I looked up, tried to make out a face. The voice was familiar. They all are.

"Peter?" I yelled.

"Aye!" he responded.

This was Michelle, then, obvious now that I recalled her name.

"I'm sorry this happened to you, Michelle," I said as I looked for a suitable rock. There were many nearby, thankfully.

I took one, lifted over my head and brought it down hard. She closed her eyes right before it hit. I checked. Once was enough.

I looked up, caught Peter's eyes. He nodded once, turned back and continued his climb.

* * *

Twilight was approaching. I had just the one last hard test to pass. The truck stop. Were they encamped there today? If so, what was their mood? Would they let me pass?

I had succeeded before. I knew others had not. I knew they could counter every possible strategy I could think of if they were inclined to do so. If I went fast, if I went slow. If I went armed or if I went silently and attempted subterfuge. If they wanted to stop me, they would. It was as simple as that.

I approached the bend and maintained my pace. By now, my body ached all over. I had developed a rash. My legs, my wrists, my shoulders were on fire. There was no position I could take that didn't cause me great discomfort. I wasn't sure I'd be able to stand on my own if they did force me to stop.

I turned the corner and saw the first of the fourteen trucks. The rest came into view. They had made a circle of chairs, boxes and sat around each other. They spoke quietly with each other.

"Coming through!" I yelled. I did not want to surprise them. At least I tried to yell those words. It came out more as a disarticulate grunt. I'd brought no water with me, an error I would need to correct next time.

Several of them stood and arranged themselves in a loose line. My spirits fell. I slowed to a stop. I could barely maintain my balance.

"Got the good sneakers today," one of them said. I struggled to remember his name... TJ. That was how he was called.

I tried to answer, but my voice wouldn't work. I had had nothing to drink for hours. I nodded instead and grunted.

"Give him some water," said TJ.

I smiled in thanks and took the lukewarm bottle of water gratefully from his companion... Erick. I took several swallows.

I cleared my throat.

"I'm trying to meet someone new."

"Is that right?" TJ replied. "Are you gonna make it? You got time?"

"Should have. Will have. If you let me through. And someone's there, of course."

"Of course," he responded. "Share?" he asked.

"I promise," I said.

"Alright. Good luck. Keep the water. Take another if you want."

I accepted his offer. It wasn't exactly gracious of him. I knew he had hundreds of bottles in the truck behind him, but I was grateful nonetheless.

* * *

It was dark now, there wasn't much time left, forty-five minutes at most. It had grown cool, noticeably cooler than back home.

Nothing save my breathing and the comforting hum of my bike's rolling wheels disturbed the otherwise perfect silence. No birds, no insects, no rush of cars. Even the wind had found someplace else to haunt.

I kept to the center of the road, barely able to keep myself moving in a straight line. I was sore. I was tired. I was in pain. I hadn't pushed myself like this in a very long time.

The thin sliver of the moon did little to help me see. Starlight and the thin moonlight made seeing even as far as the road's edge a challenge. This stretch of road was unfamiliar to me. Maybe even new. I was not familiar with its potholes, oil slicks and gravel. I was deathly afraid I would hit a patch and fall. If that happened, I feared I would not be able to get back up. And even if I could, it would steal precious seconds, even minutes from me.

* * *

Twenty minutes left. At most. I was certain i had never come this far before. Cold comfort, that. No one was here, no sounds, no evidence at all. I contemplated stopping, lying down to just stare at the stars and wait.

* * *

Sheer stubbornness. It kept me going those last few critical minutes. I did not want any regrets when this was over. I refused to stop.

I heard crying ahead.

I stopped pedaling, listened Yes, directly ahead. I slowed, staring intently. A person on the ground. A discarded bicycle nearby. I called out.

"Oy! You OK!"

The crying stopped.

I slowed as a body slowly stood up off the ground. A woman.

I stopped the bike, stumbled and fell. My legs would not hold me.

She stumbled over to me, helped me free of the bike. My arms and wrists scraped across the rough road. I ignored it. I set aside all of today's pain.

I managed to stand with her help.

We stood and stared at each other intently, eyes darting from face to shoulders to feet and back again.

We both broke out in a smile.

"Hello, stranger, I said."

"Hello, stranger, she replied."

We both laughed. I laughed for joy for the first time in ... I did not know. A very long time.

"Marie," she said.

"Ron," I replied.

"I stopped early," she said. "I could do better. At least five minutes, maybe fifteen with practice."

"I can do a little better. Five minutes I think. No! Ten! Maybe a little more."

"That would give us at least twenty-five, maybe thirty minutes," she said.

"It will take us many years to know each other at that rate,"

I said. I couldn't stop smiling.

"Decades," she replied, her voice a loud whisper.

Decades, I thought. Such a wonderful thought.

"Yes," I replied. Decades.

We sat on the hard road of the highway side by side and stared at the stars until with a loud rushing sound

* * *

I awoke, confused anger taking hold of me. Memory swept the away that confusion, replaced by ... joy.

"Maria," I said out loud. "Her name is Maria."

My wife flung the blankets away, punched me in the shoulder.

"I'm so happy for you! And all of us! It's been such a long time. How long do you have with her?"

"Twenty to thirty minutes."

She stared at him for a moment and smiled.

"It will take years... no, decades! That's amazing!"

She was right. I smiled back at her, got out of bed to get ready to see Maria again.

Part 2!:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hvNHLqwKyJx8beogStRa67VOJ09ZJdrg-trMwfHH2Oo/e/dit?usp=sharing>

