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# Descent

## > I.

The Chief Data Analyst of the Atmosphere Management Administration emerged from his apartment building well prepared for another day's work. He had been up late the night before, analysing a seemingly endless amount of rather bleak weather data. So it was a little wearily that he stepped into the harsh, artificial light of the street, adjusting his scarf and coat against the cold of the morning. Behind him, the automated female voice of his building's intercom reminded him, in a pleasant but firm tone, that the door was open and to please make sure it closed. Though he'd never known it to stay open, he was by nature a cautious man and, as it turned out, by occupation a well-informed one: familiar as he was with certain air pollution warnings, he turned from his brief inspection of the street to watch the door shut. Satisfied by its reassuring click, he started on his way to the metro.

It was a cold, windy morning. Strong gusts roared down the avenue, crescendoing in the leafless tops of plane trees that dotted the sidewalk. Streetlamps lit the naked, parchment-coloured branches at evenly spaced intervals, and threw their sinuous shadows onto the pavement. Above, the sky hung black, ominous, and close about the city. Somewhere beyond this veil of darkness weather drones hummed on their morning route around the city. Since he would soon be poring over the data collected

by these drones, he made a point of taking in the scene on the street, as an opportunity of balancing the objective and empirical with the subjective and intuitive.

With this thought in mind, he made his way to the metro stop a little more alert than usual to his surroundings. He saw, as if for the first time, how the traffic lights and cross roads gleamed brightly against the black background of predawn, marking time in their piecemeal way. A reflective sign lit up by the revolving lights of a passing sanitation vehicle informed him that the street was under surveillance for the sake of his own safety. Stopping for a moment at a cross road, he listened to the ambient sound of mechanical motion that permeated the street, and to the clicking of tree branches in the wind that punctuated it. Then, at first from distant reaches of the city and then from the end of his own avenue, the sirens sounded: wind advisory. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat and, leaning into a rising gust, quickened his pace.

## > II.

Meanwhile, below ground in the main metro station of the city, crowds circulated through a complex system of escalators, stairwells, and platforms. From one of these stairwells flowed

a stream of morning commuters. They climbed the stairs to the foyer of the station keeping a sombre silence and their movements looked rehearsed, like the movements of dancers long accustomed to a routine. A few desperate, stray passengers tried to squeeze past the rush of exiting commuters, in hopes of making the next train—but no one climbing the stairs seemed to notice or acknowledge them. Only very cautious attempts at conversation—nothing more than low and indistinct murmurs—could be heard above the sound of the commuters' feet on the worn, concrete steps. The hushed quality of the scene resembled a religious procession.

And this procession was complete with an officiating priest: a one-eyed beggar with a burned face sitting at the bottom of the stairs. To the sleep-deprived commuters, she was little more than her own unbroken chain of words, which she formed like a rosary: always with the same words, always returning to the same beginning. No one seemed to understand what she was saying—but her outstretched hand seemed to say enough. She held it out modestly, palm up, open to the charity of the passengers or to some miracle that would reunite her with her missing eye. She was so roundly ignored, in fact, that an observer might have concluded that she belonged to some separate plane of existence, that she was some blind prophet or shade of the underworld.

### > III.

Descending the final flight of stairs on his way to the metro platform, the Data Analyst noticed two blue bins, each bearing the label "ENTERTAINMENT". As he passed them, he watched as nearly all of his fellow passengers reached into the bin and pulled out personal devices, in what appeared to be various stages of obsolescence. On the other side of the corridor lay the second bin, to which exiting passengers returned their borrowed devices. The sound of the devices being dropped into the bin echoed through the quiet corridor and platform.

The Data Analyst proceeded to the platform without taking a device from the bin. When the next train arrived, he took a seat, as usual, in a middle carriage of the train. From his seat, he watched the automatic doors close implacably on a flustered, middle-aged commuter. The man seemed to find solace, however, in the device he had just retrieved from the Entertainment bin. By the time the train departed from the platform in a rising, subterranean pitch, the man was fully immersed in something on the device.

Then the train plunged into the darkness of the tunnelled track, and the Data Analyst observed the windows transform from a transparent to reflective surface. The scene inside the carriage suddenly appeared reflected on the windows, forming a palimpsest against the tunnel walls behind. This is what the Data Analyst saw:

The interior of the carriage was relatively old and gave the impression of rugged serviceability—from its heavy, groaning doors to its solid, overhead handrails, to its sturdy, unforgiving seats. There was also a complete lack of aesthetic coherence, as far as the Data Analyst could tell. No colour scheme was readily perceivable: the carriage's white and blue frame clashed with the black, matted floor, the off-white seats, and the brown handrails.

He was aware, of course, that none of the other passengers in the rather crowded carriage paid any attention to these details. It was true, that more often than not during his morning commute, he was as absorbed in his personal device—in some form of entertainment or some last minute data analysis—as his fellow passengers were now. With this realisation, the Data Analyst enjoyed a small sense of superiority, and found an unexpected benefit from the fatigue that kept him from subjecting his eyes to the bright light of his personal device's screen.

This rather innocent sense of superiority was heightened by his conclusion that the carriage's now reflective windows seemed to represent a definitive characteristic of the scene. It seemed to represent something more profound than the quick glances in the windows to check appearance, the wardrobe adjustments, the small rituals of self-maintenance that were so common on the metro. The Data Analyst expressed it in the form of an equation: the average amount of attention paid to one's surroundings being inversely proportional to the average amount of attention paid to one's self. Indeed, there was something intensely self-reflective about what he saw in the metro, which he couldn't put into words but that seemed to be epitomised by the blank expression of the man sitting in front of him. The man, that is, who appeared to be staring directly at him—but who held his gaze so steadily, who maintained so precisely the same almost stoic, almost plaintive expression, all of which indicated that he was staring into the window above the Data Analyst's head. The man looked like he was sitting for a religious painting.

The Data Analyst continued his inventory of the other passengers throughout his commute. He watched as they entered and exited the

train, as they turned their rented obsolete devices on and off. Despite this flux, the passengers were united in their quiet devotion to the entertainment on their devices: an Asian woman across the aisle was vigorously tapping her screen in an attempt, the Data Analyst deduced, to advance to the next, more challenging level of her game; next to the Asian woman, leaning against the automatic doors of the carriage, a university student dressed in sweatpants and a heavy winter coat stood engrossed in something on his device. Finally, the Data Analyst's attention rested on the personal device of the woman sitting next to him. Under her black pea coat she was dressed formally and her pale, unornamented hands framed a scene that immediately captured the Data Analyst's interest.

#### > IV.

The Device displayed a video of a young girl playing on a beach. She knelt in the wet sand closest to the water, examining its rough, glistening grains. Then she sat on her heels, digging with a small plastic shovel. At intervals, she held the sand up to the afternoon sun like buried treasure, and then let it slip slowly through her fingers. Then the video stopped and the woman swiped the screen to the next video, which showed the same young girl dancing wildly in the living room of an old house, this time with her blond hair pulled back into pigtails. The video's low-resolution image seemed to match the dated interior of the house. The train's wheels bumped iambically on the track and, this time, the woman swiped to a photo. The photo showed the young girl again, this time next to a woman who by all indications was her mother: their sandy blond hair was identical and their tanned skin, accentuated by white blouses and sunshine, was of one shade. Their faces bore an unmistakable family resemblance that was made even stronger by the presence of a third girl in the photo, presumably the young girl's friend, whose flushed face and black hair contrasted sharply with her companions. They stood in front of a section of low, green railing that overlooked a sparkling expanse of sea.

Then the screen went blank and the woman rose from her seat, preparing to get off at the next stop. As the train arrived at the platform, the reflection on the windows vanished, replaced by the grey walls and fluorescent light of the platform. The Data Analyst joined the group of commuters congregating somewhat anxiously at the car's automatic doors; on the

platform, grave faces readied themselves to board the train.

When the train's automatic doors opened, the Data Analyst exited and followed the line to the end of the platform. Just as he reached the stairwell that led to the foyer of the station, the sound of the departing train faded and, in the resulting quiet, he discerned two conspicuous sounds, both originating in the stairwell. The first was the sound of personal devices being dropped into their bins, a sound that was constant, like the ticking of a metronome; the second was a human voice, monotone and measured. On entering the short corridor leading to the stairwell, a woman, with her hand extended in the unmistakable attitude of a beggar, came into view.

She hunched in a corner of the corridor, next to the entertainment bins. The Data Analyst saw the woman in the black pea coat drop her device into the bin and mount the stairs without looking at the beggar. As he shuffled past, the Data Analyst fixed his gaze first on the woman's hand, which he noticed was badly burned, and then on her face, the left side of which was similarly burned and seemed to shine under the light of the stairwell. She was missing an eye on the burned side of her face. Then he turned to the stairwell, climbed the first few steps, and then turned back—but the sloped ceiling of the stairwell concealed all but the woman's swollen ankles and worn orthopaedic shoes.

Going up the remaining stairs to the bustling foyer of the station, the Data Analyst couldn't help but remark the improbable yet undeniable resemblance between the burned, deformed face of the beggar—with her grained, blond hair—and the face of the girl whose childhood he had so recently witnessed.