

DANGEROUS INTERSECTIONS

Rosalia Scalia

Lifting her face toward the March sun, clutching the harness of her guide dog, Gracie, beside her, Lucy steps off the kneeling bus and heads east on Pratt Street. March's blustery wind dances around her, a Tasmanian Devil raising goosebumps on her arms under her winter coat. Every year, her father reminds her that March comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb, but she changed her mind about this the year of her undergraduate graduation, when back-to-back blizzards crippled the Baltimore metro area far into April. Winter weary and longing for a warmer sun to kiss her skin, she wondered how long March's lion would roar. Barred by the lion's roar, no robins call "cheerily, cheer up." Car horns blare. Tires whine, engines drone, and sounds of general rush-hour traffic bounce and echo around her.

Just beyond the Columbus Center, characterized by its continuous, mechanical hum, she approaches the Pratt Street bridge over the Jones Falls

River and the dreaded President and Pratt streets intersection, a dangerous one even with trusty Gracie at her side. Flashes of light are visible to her despite the rare, genetic birth defect that formed her irises into keyholes, stealing her vision. She can discern the presence and absence of light, detect and feel the sun's heat, but not the cars speeding north and south on President Street. After an able-bodied twenty-year-old neighbor was run down in the intersection, the homeowners' association sent a flurry of angry letters to the city, containing before and after photos of the injured man, demanding a pedestrian bridge, the idea nixed and nayed because it would restrict truck traffic. She'd be happy with a simple talking pedestrian walk/stop light on each side of the street.

Lucy commands the dog onward. At the footbridge, she smells oil, dead fish, tar, diesel, all wonderfully noxious—she loves noxious odors, including carbon dioxide from car tailpipes—and considers them the next best thing to fragrance of Spring. She vows to write that letter she's long put off, requesting the city install the talking pedestrian signal.

“Forward, good girl, Gracie, good girl,” Lucy praises the dog, petting the top of her head. The dog steps forward, guiding Lucy closer toward Pratt and President. Engines hum to her left, indicating that traffic traveling south on

President must have stopped at the signal on the intersection's north side, but she's still unsure if cars were turning south from Pratt onto President. She proceeds, but the dog steps sideways in front of her, a signal that the forward command would put her in danger, and she realizes cars were turning.

"Good dog, Gracie, good doggie!" Lucy says, straining to hear the silence that indicates it's safe to cross. Several times, Gracie disobeys the command to proceed, blocking Lucy's forward movement, preventing her from stepping into the street. Like all guide dogs, Gracie is trained to intelligently disobey any command that would put Lucy in danger. Southbound traffic whirls and hums, indicating that the signal must have switched again. Then, finally, Lucy hears silence and commands the dog forward.

"How does that dog know how to cross the street?" A man's voice asks. It's Bird, the grocery store owner whose store sits two blocks south of her house on the same street.

"Magic," Lucy says. She dislikes Bird for feeding Gracie luncheon meat when they're in his store, after she repeatedly asks him to stop.

"I wish I had a magic dog," Bird says. He laughs and falls in step with her. Despite her annoyance with him, she's grateful to be crossing safely.

“Don’t feed Gracie when we’re in your store,” Lucy says, unable to restrain herself.

“Well, hello to you too! What’s the big fucking deal?” he says.

“Distracting her when she’s working puts me in danger,” Lucy says, careful to keep her tone matter-of-fact. One of the first lessons of having a guide dog is not allowing strangers to pet or feed a working dog.

“Nothing in my store is dangerous.”

Lucy purses her lips. Bird obviously refuses to grasp her point. She says nothing in the hope that he’ll stop talking.

“What do you do to relax?” Bird asks in a way that sounds flirty and conspiratorial.

“What does anyone do to relax?” she asks, keeping her voice neutral in the face of his cheek. *It’s none of his damned business*, she thinks.

“Like what?” Bird asks.

Lucy sighs. “Whatever anyone else can do.”

“Can you give massages?” he asks. Lucy can’t decide if he’s joking or serious.

“Can *you* give massages?” she repeats, trying to hide her annoyance.

“Only to pretty women,” Bird says. His fingers dance down her spine like mini ballerina legs, then pushes deeper into her skin. Bird’s hurrying her across the street.

Lucy wonders if the wave of cars is again rolling toward them.

“Are we safe?” she asks.

“Of course!” Bird says, his ballerina fingers now like a claw perched on her back. Bird didn’t ask if it was okay for him to touch her. She bristles at the invasion of her personal space.

“Invite me to your house, and I can give you a massage you won’t ever forget,” he says. He laughs in such a way that Lucy can’t tell if he’s joking while his fingers caress her back. When they reach the median in the middle of the street, she tries to shake them off.

“How’s the missus?” Lucy asks, wondering how his wife can tolerate him.

“Fine,” he says. “Joyce and Delia always do a great job holding down the fort when I’m away. So, I hear you’re teaching Delia piano?” Bird stretches the sound of Delia’s name—Deeeeeliia—almost singing it.

“One of my best students, if not *the* best. If she sticks with it,” Lucy says.

“She’s a good worker. I don’t know what I’d do without her,” he says. “I wish she’d talk more.”

“She’s reserved,” Lucy agrees.

“Complete opposite of her mother. Man, Ivy holds nothin’ back. Maybe that’s why the kid’s so quiet. Can’t get a word in edgewise when Ivy’s around,” Bird says with conviction. Lucy has only met Delia’s mother once, and she doesn’t remember an overly talkative person.

“Only one car is stopped at a red light a block away” Bird says. “Wanna try to make a run for it? I can hold your hand,” he says, grabbing her forearm instead.

Lucy listens and hears no traffic sounds. “Not necessary to hold my hand. Gracie’s guiding me.”

“Actually, you won’t need to run, just walk fast.”

“Gracie’s guiding me. That’s her job.” Lucy shakes her arm to wrangle it back from Bird.

“Don’t be silly,” Bird says, holding her arm tighter and dragging her quickly across the street.

“Let go!” Lucy yells.

“Nonsense,” he says.

His thick, fleshy fingers encircle her forearm like a heavy bracelet; without regard for her safety, he pulls her forward, forcing her to increase her pace as if she's being whipped around.

"Forward fast, Gracie, good girl," Lucy commands the dog while trying to yank herself free of Bird's hold. "Let go," she repeats.

Bird ignores her, so she drops Gracie's harness. Bird's pulling her too fast, not allowing enough time for her to feel for a curb and, missing it, she nearly falls forward onto the pavement.

"Jeez, Lucy!" Bird says, grabbing her. His muscled arms encircle her body to prevent the near fall. His cinnamon and spice cologne floods her nose and, for a minute, arrests her senses. She can't remember the last time she stood so close to a man, close enough to inhale the zesty, masculine fragrance. Gracie yelps, then growls. Lucy knows she's on the sidewalk, but she's disoriented and doesn't know what direction she's facing. Lucy pushes Bird away, calls the dog to her, and feels around for the animal's head and back to retrieve the harness. Bird stands too close to her, inadvertently blocking her from Gracie, who's now growling. Locating the dog and the harness, Lucy pulls the animal closer to her left leg, inserting her between Bird and her leg, but the man is still standing too close to her, and the dog keeps growling.

“What the hell?” Lucy says, pushing Bird away from her.

“Hear that? That right there is why I feed the dog in the store,” he says. “I just helped you cross the fucking street!” Bird says. “How about a ‘thank you?’”

“You put me and Gracie in danger,” Lucy says, stroking the dog’s head and back, vigorously rubbing the fur on the dog’s throat and neck, trying to calm her enough for her to stop growling. “Sighted people take what they see for granted,” she says, thinking that Bird’s carelessness makes him a dangerous man. “Good dog,” she says, stroking Gracie’s ears.

“Good dog, my ass. She growls at me all the time,” Bird says. “In the store. Remember? And now,” Bird says.

Lucy doesn’t remember the dog ever growling in his store.

“But wasn’t it fun to run across the street like a couple of kids?” he asks.

“You have a warped sense of fun,” Lucy says. Gracie’s harness in hand, Lucy commands the dog home because she’s unsure which way she’s facing; she relies on the dog to get her there.

“Hey, what’s the hurry?” Bird walks along side her. “You just walk away like that? We’re going in the same direction!”

The dog guides her across a narrow intersection that marks the street that comes before her own, South Hampton.

“So, how did you acquire old lady Nostriola’s house,” Bird asks.

Lucy rolls her eyes. “Forward, Gracie, hup. Who’s Nostriola?”

“Old lady Cordova. Always minding other people’s business.”

“Oh,” Lucy says. “Aunt Frankie? I inherited her house.”

“No shit! Wait ’til them old biddy neighbors start minding your business. Old lady Cordova was just one of them with nothing else to do all day.”

“My aunt always treated me well. She gave me her house, for God’s sake,” Lucy says. They turn the corner of South Hampton Street. Lucy’s house sits at the far end where South Hampton intersects with Sunflower Street, and Lucy and Bird walk in silence until Gracie stops, signaling that they have reached Lucy’s house. “Later, Bird,” she says, anxious to be away from him.

“Maybe I can come over to hear you play piano one day,” Bird says. “My own personal concert. Better yet, when Delia has a lesson. I’d *really* like to be able to hear *her* play.”

“Riiiiight,” she says. *Fat chance*, she thinks. She fishes for her house keys in her jacket pocket. The dog climbs the three steps to the top of the stoop.

Lucy steps inside and shuts the door behind her. Two seconds later, incessant banging on the front door reverberates through her small house. Knowing it's Bird, she engages the chain door lock, restricting the door's reach.

"What?" she asks.

"Are you always so rude?" Bird asks. "Everyone in this neighborhood respects me. I do a lot for people around here."

"I'll keep that in mind," Lucy says, stifling a smirk.

"I want to hear Delia play," Bird says.

People in hell want water, she thinks, recalling one of her Aunt's favorite phrases and stifles a laugh. "I'll ask her. If she wants an audience during her lesson, I'll let you know. I don't recommend it. Bye," Lucy says, shutting the door.

"Are you always so rude?" Bird shouts through the locked door.

"Are *you* always so rude?" Lucy parrots, thinking he's an ass despite his reputation for being generous toward the church and needy neighbors. She's heard he's donated all the flour, butter, and sugar for the neighborhood's Shrove Tuesday doughnut festivals and that he's paid the dental bills for a handful of the senior citizens too. Maybe he's just a clown, she wonders.

Lucy unfastens Gracie's harness and immediately hangs it on its peg in the closet. She hits the play button to her answering machine on the table next to the closet, and the mechanical voice informs her she has three new messages.

Two hang-ups, but the third excites her: Nick, one of her Peabody piano students, asked her to join him and some other musicians for open-mike night this evening, a blues jam, down at the Yellow Moon in Fells Point. It begins at 9:30-ish. She checks her braille watch. Only 4:30 p.m. She hangs her coat on the empty wooden hanger and considers Nick's invitation. She doesn't want to stay out too late and knows that open-mike nights of musical jams can last through to the 2 a.m. last call. She decides to go only if Nick agrees to drive her to and from the bar and to transport her home before midnight. In the kitchen, Lucy refreshes Gracie's water bowl and telephones Nick before she heads upstairs to relax and change her clothes.

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Gracie harnessed up, portable keyboards in hand, ready to jam, excited about the opportunity, Lucy waits in her living room for Nick to arrive. He's late. Thirty minutes to be exact, and now Lucy wonders if it'll be worth her time to go at all if she's expecting to be home before midnight. By the time

they find a parking spot in Fells Point, and she sets up her portable keyboards, it might be time to start packing up again to return. She faces a full-day teaching schedule tomorrow. She decides that she's not going if Nick fails to arrive in the next few minutes.

The doorbell rings and, expecting Nick, she yells, "Coming!" as she opens the door.

"Lucy! May I come in?" Delia says.

"What are you doing out so late on a school night?"

Delia's never knocked on her door, other than for her lesson.

"Yeah, what *are* you doing out so late on a school night?" Nick says from behind Delia.

"You're late," Lucy tells Nick.

"No such thing as being late for a jam," Nick says. "Cinderella, who is looking mighty fine tonight, will be home before midnight. Who do we have here?"

"Lucy's my piano teacher," Delia says. "I'm Delia. What's a jam?"

"Come with us to find out," Nick says.

"Nick, she's only fifteen. She needs to be eighteen to get into a bar."

“She can pass for eighteen. She’s jail bait,” Nick says. “Flanked by two beautiful women, I’ll be the envy of the night. That said, only colas for you, Delia,” he adds.

“Is Nick your boyfriend?” Delia asks Lucy.

“A colleague,” Nick says. “I teach strings and bass at the Peabody. My stand-up is in the truck. I’ll be jamming with it tonight.”

Lucy hides her surprise. How did she not know about Nick’s taking up an additional instrument? This was one of the employment benefits of working at a music school, and Lucy usually kept track of what her fellow instructors were playing. “What if she gets carded?” Lucy asks.

“We’ll vouch for her,” Nick says. “Get ready to showcase your best chops, Delia. Make your teacher proud.”

“We don’t have much time. We can’t keep Delia out late on a school night,” Lucy says.

“My parents won’t be home for a while. They’re both working late,” Delia says. She asks to use the phone and leaves a message for her parents that she’s at Lucy’s after work. Delia fails to tell them that she’s going to a bar for a jam. Lucy notes the lie of omission and worries about the ethics of taking her underage piano student to a bar. The possibilities of all the things that

could go wrong with an underage girl in a bar add up in Lucy's mind, and she's wondering if she should call the whole thing off and find out why this student came to her house. Before she can say anything, Nick grabs her portable keyboard and jaws on about the jam session.

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In Nick's truck, the space is cramped by the stand-up bass, Lucy's portable keyboard, and Gracie cramp the space, forcing Lucy and Delia to sit almost on top of each other in the front passenger seat.

"Delia, I've never seen someone with a bigger smile!" Nick says.

"Glad to be off work. I hate my job," Delia says.

Nick laughs. "You and a hundred thousand other people," he says. "But the piper has to get paid. I've never hated being a musician though."

"I need the job to pay for piano lessons," Delia says, her voice nearly a whisper.

Hearing that Delia earns her own piano money makes Lucy appreciate her student's effort much more. Nick's hand reaches for Lucy's, and he squeezes it. Neither of them let go. Lucy decides she likes being with Nick, even if they work for the same school.

“I could never get your attention in those faculty meetings,” Nick says. “I had to enroll in your piano classes, and what luck? I get to meet another student who’s a fan!”

“Is this a date?” Lucy asks.

“This is whatever you want to call it,” Nick says, and he kisses the back of her hand.

Lucy pulls her hand back, unsure if Nick should be kissing it at all, and especially in front of Delia, an impressionable kid.

“We’re almost there,” Nick says, his voice excited. “Lucy, I’ve wanted to introduce you to the blues jams at the Moon for a long time.”

“It’s hard to sit all cramped like this,” Delia says, shifting her position. “I’ll be glad to get out of this car.”

Delia’s dense, long hair brushes against Lucy’s shoulder and face as the girl rearranges herself in the cramped seat. Not liking the sensation of Delia’s hair against her face, Lucy pushes a segment away from her. “Your hair feels so thick! I didn’t know it was so long!” Lucy says. Delia’s hair slides through Lucy’s fingers like a satin sheet, reminding Lucy something must be wrong, something must have compelled and propelled Delia, who never comes to her house other than at her appointed lesson time, to knock on her door.

Then Lucy smells it: the unmistakable spicy, cinnamon fragrance, a gentle whiff of Bird's cologne, settled lazily in Delia's hair and clothes, permeating the air around them like a murky vapor.

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