

"Why did you do this. . ." That came from the right, thought Henri. Yes, from the right. He turned around and started back the other way.

"You are a coward!" Henri shouted into the blackness. "Why don't you die? You are no better than a mole, a dirty mole. You see nothing and you . . ." Henri tripped over something and fell forward onto the catwalk. It was Jacques. With a delighted whimper, Jacques leapt on Henri as he was struggling to his feet.

"Get away from me!" Henri kicked frantically but the stumps of Jacques' arms were solidly locked around his legs. Henri pitched sideways onto the railing. The rotten wood gave way and both men tumbled to the tracks below. Henri's arm was twisted beneath him and pain shot through it immediately. He knew it was broken. The fall had not loosened Jacques' grip on his legs, and once more Henri tried to free himself.

"You are going to die with me, Henri. Listen!" But Henri had already heard it. The One A.M. Express from Strasbourg was approaching the mouth of the tunnel. Henri reached out with his one good arm and felt for the rail. Painfully, he dragged himself forward pulling Jacques with him. The train was now in the tunnel and bearing down on them rapidly. Henri heaved himself onto the rail and grasped the edge of one of the ties, pulling himself forward at the same time. The noise of the engine and the brilliancy of the flashing headlight were terrifying.

Henri reached out again but found only gravel. A few more inches and . . . But it was too late for that.

Lying beside the tracks, after the train had passed, Henri prepared himself to die. It was funny, Henri thought. Together, Jacques and he would make a whole man.

The Courtship of Dan *

David Dawson

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DAN STEPPED slowly from the bottom step of the dingy, cracked-plaster hallway; hesitated; looked up at the door with its varnish peeling off in scaly flakes; and walked on in a slow, deliberate prod. He walked into the street which was deserted at this early hour in the morning. Who would want to get up at five o'clock in the morning if he didn't have to? He did, though. Every day—except Sunday, of course.

The street-light gave out a ghostly yellow pool of light on the corner; newspapers shuffled into the gutters with the wind's prodding; and a trash can overflowed its rusty edge with contents of green-blue edged orange peelings, tin-cans with red labels, and broken beer bottles, brown, glinting from the dew drops. Dan approached

the corner, stared at the gutter with its week-old rubbish and black, oily water with little rainbows scampering about on the top. He stepped down and walked forward with his eyes fixed on the pawn-shop window opposite. Pasty beads swung with air currents in the windows—hung, suspended by invisible cords. Old guns, the barrels a brown-red. A battered typewriter, one row of its four teeth missing, a chipped corner white, stark against the dirty blue-black. Odds and ends of jewelry—rings, necklaces, bracelets—green-gold with faint traces of carved flowers, leaves, and long-forgotten names.

A sharp blast from a horn and a hard, raspy voice made him look sideways—distracting his eyes from their focal point.

“Hey, ya dumb fool! Ya tryin’ to kill yerself? Well, don’t pick on me ta run over ya!”

Beady eyes; flat, bulby nose; bushy brows. Face like the color of carrots. Thick lips curled in a sneer.

“Sorry,” Dan said quietly while scampering to the safety of the yellow-grey curb before the pawn-shop. The man in the old black jalopy bellowed a deep, hearty laugh and drove on. The laugh, cruel, long, reminding him of another’s shook Dan from the fog. Another’s when he fell, face down, while coming out of a bar with a friend.

The fog. It was like that now. Some days it was the same, never-ending. Days when he walked through all the motions of life wrapped in a protective coating of cotton—muffled, alone, quiet. It was peaceful that way—bearable. Days when he was wrapped in cellophane. Enveloped in a small case of black velvet. No more like being in a dark cave and watching everyone else. Only this cave was made by him. And he had forgotten to make an exit—his one mistake, one folly.

But some days—it seemed so long ago, far away now—when life was different. The dirty orange and yellow-grey bus, empty, its windows square, inexpressive, lit by the white lights inside, pulled up with the usual explosive blast of air brakes and the smoky smell of burning oil. He boarded the bus, dropped in the money which clanked and clinked against the metal box, and sat in a seat—oblivious of all those around him except for the small woman who jerked her narrow head, gave him a stabbing stare from faded grey eyes, and rustled her newspaper when he dislodged her tiny, soiled satin-blue hat with his elbow. The bus creaked, squeaked, and bounded like a run-away horse over the street filled with bulging squares of gritty asphalt. Dan stared out of the windows at the darkened houses—blurs before his eyes while the bus moved on without many passengers at the early hour. The lawns—small, almost neglected—stood grey-green. Here and there, a small light came on, a window lit up by yellow artificiality, glittered, and faded into other dull grey houses with white threads in the boards.

Days. Yes, there had been other days. Days when his senses

were alert—alive—waiting for the experiences life could offer. Days when a robin's high chirp could stir thoughts in his mind. Days when green summer lawns with dandelions sprinkled on them like drops of sunlight could seem inexplicably unbearable to his emotions—made him ache with just looking at them. Times when a sunset with the rose flames of gold tinting on clouds could create unwritten symphonies in his heart; when wind caught his hair and ruffled it as he watched the spray from breakers dance in the sun, could touch the strings of his soul and make soft, tinkling sounds like bells off in a distant green, shaded valley. There were some moments when he could watch sea-gulls like white etchings against blue and feel the adventure, the hope swell up inside and push against his ribs like a living, growing being. But no more. Such days had passed. He had left them behind as a child drops unwanted toys for decay, negligence, and death. Such trifles are given up for something more important. Some thing called maturity, growth, or knowledge—all ambiguous labels for destructive forces within himself.

There. He had gone one block past his stop. He rang the bell. The bus jerked to a breathy halt at the corner, and he descended into the ring of light under the stiff, scared street-lamp. He had let his mind wander again—as usual. His mind waltzed between phrases like death, life, beauty. His thoughts never congealed, formulated into a balanced shape. He had always been a good analyst—at least of himself. But even then he never knew what was true and what was invented from his own imagination. Possibly that was why he had never sold anything he ever wrote. But he still tried.

Lois had watched the figure step off the curb. She held her soft, half-uttered scream in her throat with a clenched fist and held her feet to the floor instead of rushing out to catch him in a protective embrace. She watched him, unhurt, unscathed cross to the opposite curb and wait for the bus. She watched his slow, steady stride and his thin lips curl into that small line she knew so well. His hat, he had forgotten his hat. That was like him. The bus came. The thin, slim body was hidden by the square bulk of the bus. She caught a glimpse of his strong, chiseled features at the window before they were lost in a blur of movement and smudgy smoke.

Quietly, carefully she turned to look at the room. Small, neat. A blue chair against one wall had a small tear where the white fluff mixed with strings of contorted straw were escaping. She pulled the clean but faded blue cloth over it. The ashtrays were emptied. The floor was dull, light-brown but the dust was gone now. She lay on the sofa. Adjusted her backbone so that the spring wouldn't stab her and closed her eyes.

Dan had been cold and distant at breakfast. Not that the silence was unusual, she thought. But something strained had leaped into the room with the silence—leaped like a swift, clawing animal

and clamped itself around her heart. It was all going to begin again. The jumble of the morning's events pressed against the walls of her mind. She fought to organize them.

"Will you be home at the same time this morning?" she asked.

He sat his coffee cup down and stared at her with that dull, insipid blue glaze that she had learned to ignore but not fail to acknowledge as his way of putting her out of his thoughts.

"I suppose," he muttered after clearing his throat. He picked up the chipped white mug and sipped the coffee. "Too bitter."

"I'm sorry. I hurried . . ." she trailed off for he wasn't listening. She could tell by the way he stared at the crack in the plaster. That long, jagged crack which ran from ceiling to floor. How many times had she threatened to fill it in? It was no longer a crack. It had become a symbol of all she dreaded in Dan. It was his blank, unwavering stare at that marred spot which meant he wasn't listening to her—actually refused to think of her or what she said. But he never told her his thoughts. He never told her anything about what ran around in his brain.

She arose from the couch, walked to the narrow closet, and began to rummage through the stacks of papers, boxes, and bottles. She took out a sack, grabbed a pail, and walked into the kitchen to the yellow, stained sink. She mixed a pasty, white mess in the pail; rummaged in the drawer for a large, flat spoon; walked to the wall; and began to fill in the crack with vicious stabbing sweeps of her arms.

Someday, she thought. Someday it will all end. Someday things will change.

She fell to the floor on her knees. Sobs shook her small shoulders. The effort tore at her throat, ripped into her chest. The heart began to pound, the lungs heaved, scraped. Air wheezed through the nose. She slumped to the floor and let the cold, sticky floor press against her forehead while the pink and white pattern became a grey, indistinct blur of grey.

The muscles grew tense, knotted as she staggered to her feet, the body one mass of weak nausea. The room swept around in watery swirls as she moved to the living room and fell back on the couch with a squeak of rusty springs.

Dan came out of the factory. Pressed on either side by the sweaty, musty smells of fellow workers—fellow human beings with dark, smudged faces and tired, blurred eyes.

"Hey, Dan, the bus is comin'," shouted a short, spare man.

Allen—poor Allen. Allen with the deformed mouth making him look like a fish gasping for air. Dan ran as the bus opened its doors with a swish of stale, hot air and climbed on with his lunch box sending the sound of cracking metal as it hit the metal railing. The money clinked; the bus jerked, roared, and moved.

The houses swam in a sea of hot, wavy air as Dan stared out

through the brown streaked window. He closed his eyes and forgot.

A jolt awakened him in time for his stop. He got off. Two small boys on the corner laughed as they threw pebbles which bounced against the yellow-orange sides of the bus. They danced about in unrestrained gaiety like two leaves in the wind. They ran off down the alley filled with brown-stained boxes and yellowed newspapers.

Dan watched the two boys. A glaze filled his eyes. The free, easy ways of children. New thoughts—black, oily streets; stolen pennies; sweet apples coated with a red crust; blue bruises on red, swollen arms; robbers attacked by policemen with wooden guns.

He opened the door with the scaled varnish. Lois was on the couch. Sleeping again. But she tired so easily now. The late evening sunlight came through a triangle tear in the faded blue curtains and played with the golden strands in her hair.

She was pretty that way. The lashes made little blue-black semi-circles on her pale cheeks. Her mouth pulled into that little pout with the lower lip full. She was small, thin. Really thinner than when he had first met her.

Yes, on the bridge. In the park. With white swans slipping over the pond in stately authority. And they had talked, aimlessly, easily while walking on under green maple trees in the soft, humid shade.

But so much had happened since then. Breakfast. He had been unkind again—unconsciously, of course. He loved her. Yes, especially at times like these when he watched her. But he got some strange, unrecognized pleasure from hurting her in all the little ways. As if she were to blame for his failure. Making up for his deficiencies.

But if he lost her—Dan knelt and started to kiss her gently. But his hand recoiled from her arm as if he had touched a snake. Cold. Her face was damp. And cold. The skin felt like the cool metal of his lunch pail. And small globs of white plaster had congeled on her fingertips and under the nails. One of the nails was broken. Red-brown stains of dried blood had fallen on her dress. She wasn't breathing. She wasn't—

The tears fell on her pale cotton dress leaving little dark stains of apology next to the blood spots.

Vertigo

Jessie Cochran

THE ELEVATOR was the first thing to be endured. It was an express, all the way to the nineteenth floor, and gave Carolyn the horrifying sensation of plunging upward. She closed her eyes and tried to stop thinking that there was absolutely nothing under her. The chilly terror left only minutes after she was in her mother's hospital room.