

QUICK CHANGE

I

“James, I consider you a friend and a worthy companion,” Suzanna Mudd told me, an assessment that sounded, coming from her lips, less like praise and more like prelude to an indictment. Long ago, we had played marbles together in the dirt. For years, we walked the last three blocks to school together. In class, I was the only student from whom she deemed worthy of cheating. The feeling was reciprocal. Outside of school we didn’t socialize, a fact that accounted for my perfect attendance. I dreaded graduation.

But now it was 1911, and in the two years since we donned and shed our caps and gowns and our peers began to pair, or flee, or care for ailing parents, or as they simply joined the vast dull hum of adulthood, Suzanna and I, to my surprise and delight, found ourselves in continued proximity because of our mutual employment with her father’s newspaper. I’d been summoning my courage (finally; glacially) to revealing my feelings toward her—but hearing, now, about my friendliness and companionability, those most cocker-spaniel of traits, my body clutched in anticipatory dread. Was she terminally ill? Secretly engaged? I didn’t want to hear whatever lay beyond the inevitable conjunction. “But,” she said, “I’m afraid you’re stunted and egocentric.”

I exhaled with relief. Was that all? To my understanding, civilization itself was shaped by the whims of stunted, egocentric men.

We’d been speaking about New York City. She’d never been. Neither had I. We’d never been anywhere, a shared condition we vowed, in time, to remedy, and the recent opening of the New York Public Library provided us with the perfect destination. One million books nestled together; the only image more breathtaking was that of the two of us nestled together for the four-hour train ride.

Her father would never allow it, she told me. Or, worse, he'd insist on coming along, to which I said, "Nonsense—I'll look after you," to which she said the bit about my being a worthy companion, *but*.

"What I'm trying to say," she said, peering at me through eyeglasses that only made her lovely eyes larger, "is I don't believe you'd rush to my defense if I were ever truly threatened."

"Threatened?" I said. "Like by a bear? Because I can't imagine there are many bears in Manhattan."

She shook her head and kept walking. It was a glare-filled June afternoon, like an overexposed photograph, and we were on our way to her father's house—she because she lived there, I to deliver my latest article for edits. The article, about the new beach umbrella rental sheds opening this summer, had proven surprisingly stubborn, probably because it mattered so little. I'd finished in the nick of time, just an hour before the quick-change artist was due to arrive. All week, his piercing black pupils had watched me from the quarter-page advertisements in the *Daily Wave*, our earnest newspaper for which I produced three articles per week in order to afford my horrid apartment over a shop that sold women's undergarments.

Some days, I finished my twelve column-inches in less time that it took to drink my morning coffee. Suzanna knew about this but didn't tell her father, though it was no secret that I considered the *Wave* only after I considered the contents of my cupboard, the dust in the corners of my apartment, and the premature recession of my hairline. But ambition isn't oxygen, everywhere at once. No; it's a sharpshooter's bullet. I refused to tax myself with coming up with new adverbs to describe another nuptial or funeral, but only because I was reserving my passions for what came after my column-inches were done: writing my own fictions, and wooing Suzanna. Regarding the former, I had begun achieving a touch of success publishing locked-room mystery stories and was determined to make a literary career. (My father and mother were pig farmers, a life unsuitable to me due to my severe straw allergies and my genuine admiration for pigs.)

My latter project followed a slower trajectory, beginning with those marble games of yore. Now, both twenty-two, we remained kindred spirits. We were unmarried, restless, and faithful to the notion that we would make our marks and our marks would not be in Cape May, New Jersey.

We walked along now, passing clothiers and the good bakery and the bad bakery, her posture as erect as ever. Her hair—long, wavy, like gentle ripples of sand—had always drawn glances. But her posture, that was the real show, her body elongated and resolute. “Not a bear, James,” she said long after I’d assumed we’d moved on. “But you’re fundamentally uncourageous. I truly believe that.”

How I burned to prove her wrong! I wanted to reach out—right in the middle of the day, right in the middle of Washington Street—take her by the shoulders, and kiss her. The kiss would be imperfect, off-balance and toothy. Afterward, we would stand facing each other, shocked and changed. We would laugh, and maybe cry, because it was a kiss so long overdue.

“I have courage,” I told her.

“That’s sweet you think so,” she said. “But no. The instinct isn’t in you.”

As the advertisements were quick to boast, the Great Lehigh was not only a preeminent conjurer of mysteries but a world traveler. This was true. There was a time, not so many years ago, when he’d performed for kings and inspired more wonder and gossip across the globe than Houdini (to everyone except Houdini).

Also true, however, was that times change, and since his return to the States, the Great Lehigh had been out of the limelight. But now, after several years, he was back with a new act, testing it in select smaller venues before moving on to performances in Philadelphia and New York and Chicago. Hearing about his upcoming visit from Casey Clark, who managed the Forum Theatre, I’d immediately foreseen three articles: an advance feature, followed, upon the performer’s arrival, by an in-depth interview. And after the performance, a review.

I’d hurried straight to Sid Mudd’s office and made a case for my own special insight into the quick-change artist’s machinations.

“Misdirection,” I told him, “and the red herring. These techniques aren’t so different from—”

“You’re giving me a headache,” Mudd said. “I get it. You’re a mystery man, he’s a mystery man.” He knew about my recent short stories. “Fine. It’s yours. But demand a full-page ad. Lord knows he can afford it.”

Now I stood on the platform beside Casey holding a bow-wrapped box of saltwater taffy while the train (an engine plus three cars) ground to a stop. This was the Great Lehigh’s fabled Caravan of Amazement: the first car, for the quick-change artist himself, was modeled after Queen Victoria’s saloon carriage, and replete with stateroom, parlor, kitchen, and observation deck. The second car, rumored to be as luxurious as the first, was for his pet Pomeranian. The third car housed the crew, as well as stage sets, costumes—everything needed for the performance. All around us, Cape May was enacting its own gutsy performance. Brine in the air, waves smashing on the beach. Whipping winds shoving layers of gray across the sky. A fierce storm without rain.

A man in a beige coat stepped from the first car onto the platform, carrying a worn black satchel, and I was reminded about the artifice of promotional photos. The real man was less than average height, and with no music to his step, no boldness in his bearing. His moustache, which in his photograph extended perfectly parallel to the ground, drooped like leaves of a forgotten houseplant. I told myself not to be disappointed. We build up the wealthy and successful in our minds.

We approached him, and Casey introduced himself.

“I’m Willard,” the man said. Casey and I exchanged a confused glance. A few more men and one woman stepped off the same car carrying their own bags. The crew, I realized, just as the door to the second car opened and a man stepped onto the platform wearing a fur coat and a toothy smile. He came over. I was wrong. The quick-change artist more than did his photo justice, and I felt myself talking a half-step backward as Casey once again introduced himself.

“When can we check out the theater and begin unloading?” asked the Great Lehigh.

“Whenever you like, sir,” Casey said. “After supper?”

“Anything wrong with now?”

Casey said now would be fine. I gave him the subtlest of elbows to the kidney. “And this is Mr. Piper,” he said.

“From the *Daily Wave*,” I said. “Please, call me James.” I handed the quick-change artist the box in my hands. “This is salt-water taffy, made right here in—”

“Sticks to my teeth,” he said, and passed the box to the stocky woman. He gazed around, sniffed the air. Clapped his hands once, which got his crew’s attention. “Well, let’s do this.”

As he turned to walk away, I blurted out, “Your publicist said an interview would be—”

He swiveled and peered at me as if I were something washed ashore, a cracked shell or maybe a small dead fish. “Come by my car at ten o’clock.”

Ten o’clock was terrible, too late to finish the piece for the morning edition. Besides, Suzanna had made me promise to debrief her about the interview afterwards, and a midnight rendezvous, even having to do with the *Wave*, would never sail with her father.

“Is there any chance—”

“No,” he said. “Whatever it is, there’s no chance.”

A small scar above his left eyebrow gave the man’s stare an added edge of intensity.

“Ten is perfect,” I said.

“And your dog?” I asked. “Is it true her car is as...”—I considered my euphemisms—
“*comfortable* as your own?”

“Her car? Do you think I’m crazy, man? Ginger rides with me.”

It was quarter past ten, and the Great Lehigh was true to his word. At ten he’d been waiting just outside the second of the train cars. I had anticipated the extravagance of the Queen Victoria’s carriage car yet was unprepared for the effect of experiencing it firsthand. Every surface gleamed; anything capable of being carved or molded—table and chair legs, doors, lamps—was done so with intricacy in mind. We sat together on blue velvet chairs, he and I and Suzanna, whom I had invited along, believing