

## The Stranger Next Door

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It was late. Gabriela insisted that I stayed. I wanted to stay, but I couldn't. I cannot sleep in her apartment. There is someone - or something - watching me across the street. There always is. But no one other than me sees it.

As I scuttled the empty streets of New York, the cluster of wind, rain and fog blocked my trail towards my house - or should I say my rented room in a house - in Kensington, almost 8 km away from the city. The streets were empty - they always were at this time. And although I did not like walking at night, sleeping in Gabriela's apartment was not an option. I could never have fallen asleep with that thing staring at me through the window. And as her apartment was the only place where I could see it, I thought I was already safe. But not this time. This one was different.

The buildings, the skyscrapers and, in general, the whole city of New York was asleep. I was the only being of warm flesh and blood. It was quiet, the only sound that I could hear came from the scuttling rats and the stray cats looking for food in the dumpsters. The street was closed; a line of cons was standing along the street, desolate, like cosplayers in the park. The streetlamps flickered, enhancing the paranoia that I was already experiencing in my head. The constant change from red, to yellow, to green in the traffic lights presented three different environments; and in every single one of them, I thought of the worst - demons, creatures, UFOs. Anyone could appear in this situation, and no one would even notice. I was alone.

One block away from the New York City Subway, I felt like someone was watching me - you know, the feeling of someone staring at you or being near you - but nothing. I scanned every single street, alley, or park I passed, but no one; until I arrived at the subway stairs. As per usual, I turned around to see if I was being followed - as I always do when I am returning home, specifically at this time at night. But instead of cones and bushes, there were many figures, all looking at me. Their faces were not covered, but I could not see them clearly. I could only notice that they were smiling. They were both distant and near me. And they did not move, but I did.

I dashed through the stairs, while rapidly taking my MetroCard out of my wallet. But as I tried to swipe the card, I realized that it did not have enough credit. I tried to sabotage the station entrance system, but I couldn't. The only option was to get a ticket from machine. While I ran towards it, I heard light-paced treading from the stairs. I dared not to go to the stairs, but I needed to see what - or who - was there. I needed to know what was happening.

My heart was beating hard; harder than the time I was lost in the wild forest of Canada. Someone was following me, but I did not know if that one was a person or many, or even something else. And in any case, I was an easy target. I was in a desolate subway station at 3 a.m.

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The footsteps stopped as I was using - once again - the card. It worked. But while I was scampering towards the platform, an individual was approaching me, at a slow and gentle pace.

“Stand clear of the closing doors please” the subway’s voice pierced as I was still gazing at this unknown person. His maniacal smile was like an upturned protractor; but instead of including the different labels of the angles, it presented a row of crooked teeth. But I could not familiarize his face with anyone, or so I thought. As I ran through the innumerable stairs and corridors of the station - more than the ones that I remembered - many individuals similar to the one I had previously encountered appeared in all the posters and billboards in the station. And his face was just like the one I constantly noticed in front of Gabriela’s apartment, but scarier.

I became hypnotized by the look on his face in one of the many posters about the movies that were premiering: in “Harriet”; but instead of Cynthia Erivo’s remarkable characterization of the American abolitionist Harriet Tubman, it resembled Michael Myers from the “Halloween” films. And his eyes followed me all through the station. I used to believe that George Orwell used this idea in his novel “1984” to exaggerate the oppression executed by his totalitarian government. But not anymore.

I looked at both the individual itself and his face on the poster for so long that I lost the subway. The platform at this late hour seemed like the scenario of any horror movie. It was dark; the only few lights in the ceiling had low intensity, or even none. And as I stared into the black tunnel, a herd of individuals grew closer. They were not ordinary people, but the same person I had been seeing in Gabriela’s apartment, in the street, and in the station. He was everywhere, yet there was no sound coming from it. And they were not even climbing to the platform. They were just staring at me.

I started thinking about what was happening, because this whole situation was far away from normal. In fact, I had not seen any other person apart from it in the streets. There were no homeless people on the station stairs, as there usually were. And no train had passed in the past 5 minutes, which was almost atypical, particularly in this stop. Could I be already asleep in Gabriela’s apartment? Could I feel the weight of my wallet in my overcoat? Because that could determine whether I was sleeping or not.

But while I was pondering the situation, the one individual who had been chasing me since I had entered the station arrived. He was walking slowly towards me. And I had no other escape than entering the tunnel. But I was not going to do that, because I was going to be killed anyway, either by him or a train.

Yelling was my last option. What was once a quiet setting became polluted with screams and shouts. I immediately regretted not accepting Gabriela’s proposal. I immediately regretted entering the subway station, chaining myself in a dead-end scene. And most importantly, I regretted not asking for help when I saw this person in Gabriela’s window for the first time.

But as I closed my eyes, waiting for my own death, I heard a voice.

“Do you need help?” a frightened man asked. And I realized that – just like the night before - I had had a schizophrenia attack. And that was all.