

Fate and Folly

Joseph Martensen

On 15th and Broadway, on a rather gloomy morning, a girl walks into a coffee shop. She makes herself small, drawing her shoulders in close. A bell sways above her as the door opens, but she takes no notice of it. It is a new coffee shop, the kind that is firmly knotted in the gentrification of an older community—all wooden walls and fresh plants and chalkboard menus. Behind the register, a young man's mouth moves. "What can I get you?" the girl guesses. "A small latte, please," she says, but something is wrong, the barista looks confused, almost disturbed. She has said the words, they are there hanging in the air, but they are a foreign thing. It is as if the barista has passed an old schoolmate whose hair has changed style. There is a striking flash of familiarity, but the difference from expectation is significant enough that he does not say hello. Such is the nature of the girl's words. Whether it be her timbre or inflection (or lack thereof) the girl's words are just unfamiliar enough that they defy comprehension. He repeats his question as if he has not heard her, and the girl suppresses her annoyance. With a tight smile, she reaches for her phone and types out her order. With her drink in hand, she heads for the door, but as she opens it a black cat runs out into the street. She had not seen it in the shop before. The rain spatters silently but she does not pull out her umbrella. The rain is a blessing. There are fewer people to bump into her, fewer people to ask for directions, fewer people to call out to her, fewer people to show her pity. But, the rain understands. It soaks her and chills her and matts her dark hair like it would any other. Each drop is a reminder that she is a part of this world. The rain is a blessing.

Two blocks away a man, a gritty figure aged past his years, sits under a construction placard. The man is a listener. It is the foundation of his success, but luck was too difficult a mistress to keep. He still listens though. To names of orders at the new coffee shop a few blocks up, to credit cards and room numbers when they are read aloud, to a businessman's phone call to exploit his biases for some made-up charity. Today, however, it rains, and the rain is a curse. There are fewer people to walk, fewer people to talk, fewer people to show kindness, fewer people to show pity. He sighs, his blanket is wet, it will be a few cold days ahead. A meow bubbles up above the sounds of traffic and raindrops as a black cat slips around the corner.

In a basement apartment on the other side of town in a dark room with no windows, there is a boy reading. He sits in his chair and reads a book on chess. Perhaps "sits" is not the right word. He is coiled, delicately balanced on his tiptoes as if ready to pounce like a cat. He does not seem the sort to be alone in a dark room. He is young, attractive, and athletic, and yet he struggles to make friends. Perhaps it is his demeanor, a cold biting silence. Perhaps it is his smile, always a bit unsettling as if he is analyzing the person

before him. Or perhaps it is his posture, hunched over like Atlas carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders. In the corner of the room lies a mirror image of the boy's crouched pose. Veiled in darkness there sits a cat, solid black, with two intelligent eyes.

Now, the observant reader may at this point have guessed that either coincidence or fate has something of note in store for these particular individuals. The observant reader may fancy himself clever, having deduced that these eccentric members of society are important far beyond their humble appearances. That these individuals will meet a certainty, and that these characters will provide insight into human growth and goodness is seen in much the same way. The observant reader, however, could not be more wrong.