

The Messenger

by Mark Cecil Stevens

Sophie didn't stop for lunch when she worked. She showed up first in the morning and worked through until the last package was delivered. She pedaled from building to building and walked quickly, at just shy of a run, the click-clack of her bike shoes louder than the heels worn by the polished, suited professional women that she routinely outpaced. Their faces were rouged at the cheeks, which mirrored her own wind-burnt features only in color. Her nose jutted more severely. Her cheeks were more thinly set, and her eyes perched wider, at the sharp edges near her temples. Though they watched her wherever she went, she never turned aside from her goal to acknowledge the smiles, just subtle enough to be denied, that they gave her.

She had always been awkward, long thin limbs twisting from her bent trunk, and she had suffered the jeers of other children without anger. She had always quietly ignored their taunts and gone about her business. With perseverance their disdain began to go unspoken, residing instead in their eyes, which she found easy enough to avoid.

She had felt as out of place as she looked until she learned to ride a bike. Her spine curved at just the right angle to reach the handlebars naturally. Her legs stretched to just the right length to deliver all of her strength to the pedals. Her curled hands hung easily over the brake handles.

She rode every day, often skipping school and later meaningless work to spend time on her bike. She was faster than anyone that she knew, and although she was unaware, faster than most others. She never raced, though. Racing was an intimate activity, entering into an interchange with people, whom she rode to avoid. She did not measure herself against others. She lost a series of jobs before she was hired as a messenger.

The other messengers eyed her with a sense of distrust, not because she was odd-looking, but because she outworked

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everyone else in the business. Package delivery was piecemeal work, and every high dollar package that she delivered was money out of their pockets. Of course they were all in competition with one another, but she never engaged in the jocularly that they employed to keep their contests light. She had a talent, both with coworker and customer, of speaking only enough to satisfy the request of the speaker, without injecting any of her own thought or feeling into the conversation. She never came off as rude or angry, always meeting your eyes for the requisite interval but not for any longer. She was the best on the street, she alone. She was exceptional, but only as an exception.

The other messengers had at one time invited her to come drinking with them to the cheap happy hours that they frequented on a rotating basis, but that had fallen off in the face of her constant deferrals. They laughed into their beers that she was frustrated and miserable, that she cried alone at night, or that she lay restless in bed, dreaming of their approvals and friendships. But though neither she nor they were aware, she was the happiest person that any of them knew.

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George was much less happy. He was a second-generation immigrant from Poland, and spoke with the slight accent that those who never spoke English until they had experience outside the home often had. His given name was Jerzy, but he could not bear being called "Jersey" by the boors that seemed to dog his days. Most second-generation inhabitants strove to bury themselves in the culture of their adoptive lands, but George had no love for his country. Although he knew no other home, he had been raised on the milk of nostalgia that his parents fed him daily as a child. They were bitterly disappointed that it had come to this, living as strangers in a country far from home, a strange language chattering in their ears, strange foods on their plates. Everything Polish about them was treated as foreign by neighbors and coworkers, and

although it was foreign here, it was natural to them. The homely smell of boiling cabbages made them smile, just as it made the neighbors curl their noses suspiciously whenever George's dad would step out into the hall to leave for his nightly shift as a janitor in an office building downtown. On the bus people turned away from his smile as if it were a sneer.

George never smiled at people when he was out in public. He looked at everyone in the face and stared them down unless they could hold his hard gaze until they moved out of his sight. Most diverted their eyes swiftly, sensing malice in his stare. Even men bigger than he would give way as he passed. It was a trick that he had learned on his single visit to Poland. He had returned to the village of his parents' origin, ready to immerse himself in an idyll of farm life, but found fallow fields and drunken cousins that laughed at his "city" Polish. He scowled around the village, initially without intent, waiting for his return ticket to be valid. His cousins, and then the toughs in the village square began to walk wider and wider circles around him.

On his return, he practiced his skill on the crowds on the street. He mistook men's unease for fear, and women's for coyness. It became a game for him, a contest with the world that he knew he would never lose so long as he did not flinch.

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Camille had not needed to look to see that others were staring at her at her, not before she got pregnant. She had been a pretty child, and had attracted the admiration of passersby. Her mother's drawn breath and proud smile had been her earliest reward for their praise. Her eyes on her mother, she breathed in this indirect attention until she grew into more direct praise. As she grew, onlookers stopped paying compliments to her mother and began to address her directly. But they never met her eyes. They stole a look at the curve of her hip, or her breasts, or even their promise as they began to mature.

These little acts of worship thrilled her more than her mother's pride. Soon gifts arrived, from progressively less anonymous suitors. Two particularly avid rivals distinguished themselves with expensive gifts and rutting displays. She could feel their eyes' caresses and smell their lust. She encouraged both, fanning their need with the angle of her thigh and the thrust of her hip. She saw them secretly, alternately, in ever-nearing frequency. She invited them both one night to meet her at the movie theater, and when they arrived, their paths brought them close enough that they brushed against one another. They turned toward each other, their chests instantly puffed in a display that she found so exciting that she didn't mind that throughout the conflict that they never looked to her, not once. The spectacle, much like a scene that she would have turned away from in the theater, burying her face in her date's shoulder, held her fast. When the fight was finished, and one suitor skulked away, the victor turned and viewed her with a look so full of heat that she turned slightly away, letting it catch her in profile. She did not need to see the gaze to know it was on her.

Her champion led her from the theater, both acknowledging without speaking that neither had any urge for further pageant, and he took her down some quiet road in his car. When he began to stroke her arm, just nudging the side of her breast, she felt that she could not deny him. She found sex more uncomfortable than painful, and his cries of love less believable than the looks that he had given her in advance of the act. She was shocked when he rose up from her, his face red with fresh blood, until she realized that he had been wiping his sweaty bangs from his forehead with his own torn knuckles. She said nothing to him about it as he drove her home, promising that he would contact her as soon as he returned from some ill-defined camp or family vacation. She was relieved when he did not.

She hardly had time to begin a new courtship when she realized that she was pregnant. The way men surveyed her began to change. Hunger in their stares was replaced with a benevolence that she found uncomfortable. Their warmth felt like rejection, but

she began to wish for even that after the baby arrived. No one seemed to even see her when she went out with the child. Strangers would eye her momentarily after lovingly staring at her daughter. Nobody looked at her first. Even her mother's approbation was reserved for the compliments granted her new granddaughter. She found herself squinting into the crowd, looking for a sign that someone noticed her.

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Amy looked over crowds as well, but she did it from above, from the second story of the hospital where she sat in her son's room. She looked down at the crush of people skittering on the street and told herself stories about them. She told happy, neatly-contained narratives. Unhappy faces, slouching carriages, angrily crossed arms-- each had a problem that could be solved or reconciled with an admission or an apology. Paper-wrapped bottles and smoky doorways could be erased with a caring intervention. Everyone walking out the hospital doors below had their perfect health restored. These were the same sort of stories that she could have seen on the little TV bolted to the wall above her son's bed, but she never put the thing on. He mostly slept, and she was afraid that the noise would wake him. Sometimes she would run her hand over his head without touching his hair, a phantom caress that preserved his sleep and kept her hands, cracked from the constant washing, from spreading some invisible infection.

And she told these stories as a sort of penance. When she first started noticing the bruises, she suspected her husband was abusing the boy. She began to make plans to take him away, and had first gone to the doctor to get evidence for the lawyer that she had already retained. She did not confess to her husband her suspicion when she told him about the leukemia, but he had withdrawn after the news. He took a job up in Alaska, working weeks on end. He said that it was for the better benefits, but she noticed how he brightened before leaving and came back morose.

She rejected the same sort of soothing stories that her friends and family would tell her-- that leukemia was so much more treatable than in the past, that miracles really happen. The doctors had told her that her son had an incurable form, very rare in children. They would put on a grimace and touch her shoulder, practiced evidences of their pity, but their eyes never lost the bright flash that was only appropriate when they excitedly talked of this as an opportunity to study the disease.

The boy had been admitted for an infection that somehow became worse in the hospital, and the doctors had only allowed her to sit in the room so long as she washed hands before entering and on leaving, and they prescribed a mask for visits. They told her to keep casual contact to a minimum, and choked back the angry urge to tell them that the contact that she wanted was far from casual. What good was she as a mother, masked and distant, waiting for her son to get better or not, in the corner of the room? She would have stormed out, but there was nobody else there for the boy, and she could not think of any place that she could go. So she sat.

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The receptionist sat at her desk, but there was so much activity in the action that it looked to Sophie like a sort of dance. Her hands danced from phone to pen to pad and back, in a sort of insect pattern of movement that was designed for efficiency. She switched from one call to another in a voice that must have sounded like friendly greeting to each caller, but that took on a chirping, cricket-like cadence when heard in repetition. Sophie laid a package on the counter and sniffed a little to get the receptionist's attention. She asked how she could help Sophie, another chirrup in the song, and looked up at her. Sophie was already checking her watch and thinking of the minutes ticking to deliver her next rush package as she told the receptionist where to sign. The scratch of her pen folded into the music of her day, and Sophie was already pushing open the door as the receptionist wished her a nice day.

The lilt of her voice spilled outside for a moment, before the door's seal cut it off from the street's crashing ocean tones.

Sophie was faster than the other messengers for two reasons. It was true that she rode hard, and that she could easily outride all but the most dedicated racers, but even they could not match her pace over the course of the day. Her true strength was a power of organization and discipline to confine her motions to the necessary tasks to complete the work on time. Any one of the fastest men would have wasted time flirting with that receptionist, and she for her part would have happily sung to them for the minutes or seconds that the rhythm of her own job afforded her for such flattery. While riding, Sophie looked not at cars, but rather at the whole of the moving street, one mass of physical interaction, and put herself where there was nothing in that stream of motion. Horns failed to startle her, and she never looked to the sidewalks for friends, or for pretty people she might befriend. It was extraordinary that she had even taken notice of the baby carriage at all. It wasn't in her way.

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Amy had seen the carriage from her window above the street. She had already noticed Camille, pushing the carriage, and the way that she seemed to be scanning each face in the crowd as they passed, and that she didn't seem to find what she sought in any of them. She noticed George, also peering into the faces passing on the sidewalk with an intensity that seemed to part them with the physical force of a shove. She saw their eyes meet, and saw the relief, even joy, that Camille seemed to show in her eye when she had caught his attention. She saw the intensity increase in his own stare as their eyes locked. As they advanced on each other, Amy began to tell herself a story of reunion, but their meeting was not an embrace. George's focused look twisted into a snarl and he threw a shoulder into the woman as they passed. Camille lost hold of the baby carriage and it rolled into the street. Amy sucked in her breath

as she saw the Sophie dart in from the side, pulling the carriage back out of the road. A couple horns blared, but the traffic kept moving. Sophie stood astride her bike, holding the carriage out to Camille, but she seemed not to notice it, staring at her feet. George mirrored her posture, staring down and twitching the leg that didn't carry his weight, looking to Amy like he might run off. Sophie looked from one to the other, trying to get somebody to take the child. The baby's face was screwed up to a cry that looked furious though it was too high and soft to hear through hospital glass. "Oh, the poor baby", Amy said as she let out her breath. She began to cry, a quiet choking that broke into a wail that must have rivaled that child's, even through her mask. Her hands hung limp over the sides of her chair. Her son's hand slipped into her own and held it until she could quiet herself.

