

Café Kundalini

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Snow fell while I was in the halal market on Avenue A. The fine flakes, more like frozen mist, created nimbuses around the lampposts in Tompkins Square Park. At my feet, it was gray mush, like a slushie made of the lazy super's month-old mop water. The only time snow in the city looks clean is while it's hanging in the air.

The magical mist caught me off guard. I crossed against the light, found myself drawn into the park, a place I wouldn't normally venture after nightfall no matter how many latte lesbians had moved into the neighborhood. It was a shortcut home, and I didn't want my soup to get cold. The romance of the scene made it appear safe. The druggies must have gotten a tip that the cops would be nosing around because mine were the first footprints in the snow. My shoes melted through the thin glaze, revealing the grimy pavement beneath. I walked at a faster clip.

I noticed the first couple of them only after getting deep into the mandala maze of fenced paths. I confess to not being able to tell the druggies from the homeless. They wear the same thin gray rags hidden beneath an outsized overcoat and stare with the same hollow eyes, a look of vacant pleading and puzzlement. They were nearly invisible, even to themselves.

Two men stood beneath a lamppost, transacting business in the shadowed folds of their overcoats. They glanced away and scoped me out at the same time. Slowly they turned their backs to me. Another pair slouched on a bench midway between lights, staring up into the swirl of snow.

The nearest snapped his head toward me. "Mmm. Whatcha got there?" nodding toward my steaming bag of lentil soup. His companion chimed, "Can I have some?" They reached up for it, cackling toothlessly. I swung the bag away, hoping not tip the Styrofoam container.

Others stepped from the darkness. The snow made them visible. They took up the taunt. "Can I have some? Whatcha got? Whatcha got?"

I turned down the next path in Robert Moses' maze, not sure of my direction. They came out of the shadows between streetlamps, grabbing for the bag of soup, pulling at my jacket. I ran slo-mo, chased in a dream by a presence more felt than seen.

"Whatcha got? Whatcha got?"

"It's Monika Medley," one of them joked. "Mmm."

The unseen others howled.

The thought made me want to retch. I knew he meant the woman murdered by some wacko who cut her up and made soup he served to the homeless. In this park. On just such a winter night.

Beyond them, at the next turn leading out of the park, a row of four, all men, leaned with their backs against the curving wrought iron fence. Snow dusted their shoulders and cowed heads. They looked straight ahead, but, eerily, their eyes followed me. The second man groaned twice, a moan rising up from the soles of his feet, a cry involving his whole being. The third moan was cut short. I turned around and went the other way, but had to look back.

I'd read of last year's fashion drug, one that had made the leap across species from the doucheoisie in their dingy cafes to the derelict druggies in the parks. It was called "Cordum Sacrum," Hispanic voodoo or something for "Sacred Heart," a reference to the garish Catholic depiction of Jesus' burning, thorn-encircled heart. On the street it was called simply "cordite," an equally apt reference. Like pinwheels, Veritas™, wiggies, and other penny charms, it was cheaper than a sandwich.

Transfixed, I watched the second man's chest glow with a pale reddish light from beneath his thin shirt: brighter and more distinct, the shape of his heart and arteries. Cordite makes the skin and tissue and even bone protecting the heart transparent; the infrared heat of the pumping muscles makes the heart glow. It also causes runaway tachycardia. In this last stage of an O.D. nothing would save him were he transported this instant to a table in the E.R. I turned one foot to escape and pivoted back to the scene on the other.

The thrill is the rush of blood and racing heart, the dilation of time so that the half-hour jawing with friends becomes months and even years of thoughts and experiences, all of it remembered, all of it banal. Now that the drug was cheap, and impure, it had become the last resort for those of last resort. His friends stepped aside. I put my hand over my eyes, peering between my fingers.

The written accounts and Internet videos did not prepare me for the suddenness and violence with which the man's chest exploded like a red zinnia of fireworks. The burst was nearly noiseless, the splat of a water balloon on the grass. The tatters of his clothing blew outward in a gust of luminous blood and flesh. His body did not so much fall as deflate, collapsing at the feet of the man who stood there a second ago, now a bag lady's sodden, knotted bundle.

As though propelled by the force of the blast, I raced and stumbled along the path. Flashing red lights swirled overhead. Plastic trash bags, snagged among the bare tree branches, wavered like ghosts. The siren of a squad car whooped and hollered. I ran headlong toward the street, chased by what I had seen.

But the light was the flicker of torches, and among the branches of the plane trees corpses twisted languorously at the ends of ropes, strange fruit on grotesque vines. The flames of

torchlights multiplied until the whole park seemed ablaze. Above the rumble of male voices, a shriek of terror, a wail of pain. The tattered shroud of the banshee twisted among the limbs.

My horizontal dash ended when gravity at last prevailed. Sliding across the rough pavement, I skinned both knees and palms. I landed on my stomach, the wind knocked out of me. The bag ripped and the flimsy container cracked open, splashing my face and hair with the tepid lentil soup. I must have hit my head; the noise and lights and snow and hexagonal paving blocks swirled around me. I thought I had been attacked, knocked to the ground.

My eyes focused on a pair of splattered black shoes and neatly-cuffed trousers. I was yanked to my knees. "You piece of shit."

I could not stand. Two constables heaved me roughly erect. Their ugly blackjacks morphed into sleek nightsticks. Their radios squawked and I realized they were policemen.

"It was just soup," I offered.

"He thinks I asked to see the menu."

The other officer's radio crackled. I heard the word "Valentine" among the garble, a reference, no doubt, to the man whose heart exploded. The policeman responded, "Just some rummy over here, puking his guts out."

"It's just soup."

"Then maybe you won't mind eating it again. You can start with my shoes."

I winced as they pushed me to my knees, and dug the blunt stick into my lower back.

The radio sputtered more unintelligible squawks. "Christ. Must be Valentine's Day," one of the officers grouched. "Come on."

As they let go of me, I keeled onto my side. "You wait here, scumbag," the friendly one said. "If you ain't here when we get back, we're gonna find you."

I remained curled up, the slush seeping into my jacket and pants. The squad car doors slammed and tires squealed. The red and white lights chased around the corner. I was shaken, but no longer shaking. I grabbed hold of the wrought iron fence and pulled myself up. My head throbbed, but it still worked. The thought that I would wait for them to come back and arrest me never entered it.

Realizing I was back on Avenue A, I spun around, trying to decide which way to go home. Definitely not through the park again. Did I want to go back to the market and get some more soup? I wiped my face on my sleeve. If I found the bag and container, maybe Habib would

replace it. I'd tell him it leaked and the bottom fell out. He'd roll his hand and apologize. "Not your fault," I'd say. But I couldn't possibly be that cheap.

I wended toward Habib's market, drawn by the aromas of cumin and roast mutton, but instead I crossed to the other side of 10th Street and turned the corner. As the snow renewed, I hunched into my jacket and leaned into the wind coming off the East River. I'd had barely a minute to reflect on the poor soul who had just met such a horrible end. Where were their bursts of thought now? Curling among the cold swirls of snow? Melting into the dirty slush? Chased off by the shriek of sirens, tempest-tossed among Gotham's kliegs and klaxons?

"Whoop! Whoop!" The prelude to the siren's long wail was accompanied by a flash of light from the squad's searchlight. The loudspeaker blared a warning. My heart raced, and I hurried on without looking like I was in a hurry. "Stop! Now!"

The suggestion seemed no more sensible than waiting on the opposite corner of the park for the officers to return. So I ran.

The aches that impeded me earlier vanished. My heart pumped pure adrenaline. I thought of how similar the effects of cordite must feel. I gulped the air; it seemed my lungs would explode.

Were it not for the fact that the squad car was barreling the wrong way down 10th Street and had encountered a driver either loathe or unable to back up on a slippery street, I would never have managed to elude them. The rush of blood did wonders for my brain, and I determined that it might be best to do the unexpected. I turned on my heels once more and strolled back toward Avenue A while the officers did battle with screaming sirens and amplified epithets. "Back up, moron!"

I would take refuge in Habib's market. I'd say the lentil soup was so good I wanted more, and eat it at his counter. I'd buy one of his funny knit beanies and an Arab newspaper. No cop would dare question me.

But Habib's Halal Market was no longer on the corner, nor anywhere else on the block. I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. There was huge turn-around in the restaurant business, but not that quickly, even in the East Village. It was like the earlier weirdness in the park: the burning torches and the corpses dangling in the trees. I needed to duck in somewhere before the cops got themselves turned right side out.

The new place on Avenue A was packed, and could not have looked more inviting on a wintry night, the windows all steamed up, behind which lush broad-leafed plants suggested an exotic place antipodal to New York City in February. Small teapots and candles sat on each table. I shook the snow from my shoulders.

The door was locked and I tapped on the glass. There was a commotion inside of scraping chairs and scuffling feet. Blurred shadows scurried. A hand wiped a clear circle in the condensation on the glass. The face that appeared did not speak, but raised his eyebrows like question marks.

“I’d like to come in. I’d like to have supper.”

“I’m sorry, sir. The kitchen is closed.”

“Well, some soup then. Or tea.”

“We are not yet open for business. We are closed.”

“But I saw a crowd of people in there just a minute ago. And plates and food on all the tables. It smells so wonderful.”

“An illusion perhaps, brought on by your desire to find such a place as you describe.”

“I would have been happier to find Habib’s place where it used to be.”

“Often we do not know our own desires.”

“I’m pretty sure about this one.”

“Please come back when we are open.”

“And when is that?”

“As soon as you are ready, sir.” He became indistinct, vaguely androgynous, his visage melting back into the tropical atmosphere. The polynia in the steamed glass closed over.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked up. *Café Kundalini*. At least it wasn’t going to be another hipster joint. They would’ve spelled “Café” with a “K,” just to look kool.

I stood there a minute and noted the faint flicker of candlelight at each of the tables, glowing in the steamed-up windows. One by one they were extinguished. “Horseshit,” I snorted, and crossed back to the park. “A troop of horses.”

My strategy now was to follow one unexpected turn with another. I went back to where I fell, where the officers had left me and told me to stay. The soggy bag and smashed container were still there—and the splash of soup outlining a pair of shoes. Brushing aside the slush, I sat down on the nearest bench.

The thought of sitting in my warm apartment noisily slurping soup seemed such a simple idea after a day at work. But even simple desires are complicated by how much stands in the way of their fulfillment. The evening's mishaps had no single cause: it required the concerted effort of the entire universe—this one, anyway—unfolding exactly as it did since the Beginning.

After twenty minutes twiddling metaphysical concepts, and shivering, I determined it was safe to go back to my apartment. I took the long way. I hung my coat over the showerhead and parked my shoes under the radiator. Sleep took me while sprawled on the couch. It was crooked sleep and not refreshing. I awoke cramped and late for work. My last day, as it turned out.

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Every route home from the train lead past Habib's when I was hungry. But I was worried about more spooky mischief if his market wasn't there again. I didn't think I could handle losing my mind on top of losing my job or, as they liked to put it in *Newspeak*, "an unfunded reassignment."

I stayed on 14th Street until reaching Avenue A so I could see whether Habib's was still there. It wasn't too late to continue to Avenue B if it wasn't. His tricolor awning glowed with the light from inside. I could smell his wares and pictured myself pointing to the kettle of lentil soup.

"Sorry. No soup. Uncle Habib arrested."

"What? What happened?" I stammered. My heart sank with disappointment. And I had some concern for Habib, too.

"The SS get him. Sold cola drink."

The term SS expressed the local shopkeepers' contempt for the "Sugar Squad" officers of the Dept. of Health. "Where'd he get a cola? How big?"

"Still legal in Iran. He trades for beer."

"How much is bail? We have to get him out."

"Uncle Habib at home. Sore head. I watch store. How about "Cup-O-Soup?"

I shook my head. Hot water by itself is just as tasty. "When did this happen?"

"Last night. SS closed store. I come today from school. Maybe next week Uncle Habib better."

"Send him my best."

I trudged down the block, nearly tripping on my lower lip. I was less disturbed knowing Habib's was closed last night when I had my episode. Yet when I tried to reconstruct the logic of the argument, I realized a couple pieces were missing. Somehow it seemed less crazy to hallucinate in the dark than when all the lights are on, though the visions were just as unreal.

A week without Habib's soup? I'd never last. Where else would I get a decent meal for less than a week's wages: a wage I could no longer count on? I wanted better than hipster food: three noodles, a leaf, and a smudge of sauce on a plate the size of a hubcap.

I thought briefly of going back Uptown and parking myself at *The Gripevine*, but even a little booze in my present condition would spell disaster. The only other "affordable" place was down on 9th Street: *The Two Maggots*. But I couldn't get past the name. If a friend saw me duck in there, I'd never live down supporting a trendy Manhattan restaurant that bragged Calvinist cuisine at papal prices. I turned to make my way back to Habib's. Maybe I'd try the "Cup-O-Soup" with generous splashes of Tabasco.

Head down in my determination to secure a hot meal, I didn't realize at first I had walked into the *Café Kundalini*, standing on the spot where Habib's ought to be.

The place was packed, the air steamy with bodies and platters heaped with rice and noodles and vegetables. No one paid the least attention to me. The walls were hung all around with beautiful pencil sketches and watercolors of cloud formations. The clouds seemed to drift from one edge of their frames to the opposite. I had to look away. The androgynous person with the arching eyebrows approached, greeting me with a smile.

"Good evening, sir. Pleased to have you back."

"Glad to see the improvement in your attitude... uh..."

"I am called Shakti Pat. I will be your waitron tonight."

It figured that his/her name was androgynous, too. I motioned to the remaining vacant table by the window, expecting to be told in a snotty tone of nose that it was reserved.

"Certainly."

Shakti Pat pulled out the chair and placed the menu on the table. I expected Pat to push the chair in under me, but there was no one behind me. Determined to make use of my vantage in the window, I scouted for other customers of Habib's who would scratch their heads in puzzlement while walking past the site of his former store. A line of loyalists formed outside his market even in the worst weather waiting for him to raise the steel shutters.

The menu was shaped like a work of origami. I carefully unfolded the red paper serpent which merely got longer and wider. None of the squiggly writing was familiar, but, thankfully, I could make out the prices. Nothing seemed too outrageous.

I cleared a circle in the window with my jacket cuff, noticing two of Habib's regulars scurrying past without looking in. Pat stood at my elbow, pen poised above his order book.

"I'm afraid I can't understand the menu."

Pat held out a pair of spectacles. The glasses brought the strange squiggles into focus, but words such as "Pingala" and "Sushumna" offered no clues without further explanation.

"You know what I could really go for, Pat?"

"That's Shakti Pat, if you please. Yes, I know."

He turned on his heels in military fashion and vanished into the kitchen. Half a minute later he set down a steaming bowl of lentil soup, and a second at the place opposite, at which he seated himself. She looked at me with such an expression of sweetness and solicitude that it became impossible to recall why I had thought her masculine.

"That's it. Yum. You're like that new place on 14th Street, *ESPizza*. 'We know what you want.' How'd you do it?"

"Like this," she said, reaching above her head at arm's length and extracting two glasses of ice water out of the thick air. Her uniform red brocaded jacket flapped open and it was clear that, if truly a woman, she was as flat-chested as a boy. "Ah, yes," she added, reaching again for a basket of flatbread which she set before us, and nodded.

I wasn't sure I was in favor of this custom of the waitress inviting herself to the table and sharing the meal. I must have scowled slightly, an expression she took to signify my displeasure with the flatbread, which obligingly became good old square American soda crackers, not those round artesian (sic) ones at a buck for three. I dipped my spoon and tasted soup that bested Habib's, and it was not to be defiled with crackers.

"Desires, whether satisfied or not, eventually diminish and are forgotten, replaced by the next desire. If you can make something disappear, it is just as possible to make it appear."

I hunched forward vultuously and shoveled the soup into my gullet. I watched Pat above my eyebrows. I did not once see her raise her spoon to her lips, yet her bowl became as empty as mine.

“Shall we have seconds?” The look she beamed at me was lascivious. As though the nectar of a forbidden fruit dribbled from her mouth, she licked the corner of her mouth and dabbed at her lips with the red silk napkin.

“Must you eat whatever I’m having?”

“No, but it is the custom.”

“Where is that?”

“In your language it is called The Kingdom of *Amygdala*.”

“No, not mine. I never heard of it.”

“Well, many places manage to exist even if no American knows where they are.” She flipped both her palms out towards our now brimming bowls.

The window was again steamed over and I was aware only of shapes filing past. The candle flickering in her face made it seem she was speaking even when she was silent. The warm soup and its sting of ginger put me in mind that Pat was rather attractive, and I began to be endeared to her twining a wisp of hair behind her ear with a single finger. As before, her soup disappeared spoonlessly.

Somewhere near the bottom of my third bowl, I went from sated to stuffed. Perhaps the discomfort showed on my face.

“What more would you like?” Her smile invited something preposterous, like a towering confection served with flaming brandy.

Uncharacteristically, I said the second thing that came to mind. “That soup was just too delicious. I wouldn’t mind being hungry again.”

It was as though my stomach flipped in an elevator. The hunger stirred rumbles audible three tables away. I could have eaten anything without waiting for it to be cooked.

I squinted my eyes and did my best to send Shakti Pat my famished vibe.

“The kitchen is now closed,” she said. “We have eaten the entire pot of soup.”

“Yes, but I am still hungry. Or hungry again.”

“Was that not your desire?”

“Yes, but not just before the kitchen closes. Oh, come on. Let me lick the ladle at least.”

She tore the check from her order book and handed it to me. "*Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.* Hunger is free."

I looked down at the slip of paper. "What's this?"

"Address of man needs help," replied Habib's nephew. "New job."

I steadied myself against the familiar counter, waiting for the room to spin.

"But who told you I lost my job?"

"Uncle Habib. See man on paper."

"But who told *him*?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe his friend, Shakti Pat."

I was about to utter the next pointless question in an endlessly regressing series, but took the shortcut. "Tell Uncle Habib thanks," I said, heading for the door.

"Don't forget soup."

"What soup?"

"You not so good. I tell you: Auntie Moona make you lentil soup. Not like Uncle. Very much ginger. Here."

"Bless you, boy." I held the warm package to my chest and made for the door. "Oh. How much?"

The boy shook his head. He had piercing blue eyes. "Auntie say, 'Grace is free.'"

The world, whichever one I now inhabited, was finally beginning to see things my way.