

The One

A short story by

R.M. FANSHAW

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I knew as soon as I saw him that he was the one.

The clamour of traffic, the fumes, the swish of the rain, the babble of unknown voices, all faded to a soft background hum. Unheeded. Inconsequential.

There was only him.

The people crowding the street around us passed him without a glance. He was invisible to them. But not to me.

The crowd parted and flowed around me as I approached him. They had no idea. Two worlds were about to meet, to merge, and they had no idea.

Reaching his side, I crouched down beside him on the pavement.

“Hi,” I said. “What’s your name?”

It seemed to take a moment for him to focus on me. Then awareness swam into his vacant, leaden eyes.

Grey eyes. Grey like the concrete canyon around us. Grey like the poison pumped out by the cars and buses. Grey like the soiled and tattered coat he wore; like the mottling in his bedraggled beard; like the greasy blanket he sat on.

Grey like the rain.

Still his look showed no real comprehension. How long was it since someone had spoken to him? How long was it since someone had seen him?

Really seen him?

I tried again.

“What’s your name?”

For an instant, his gaze held mine - then slid away again, down to the bottle by his side. He frowned at it, then picked it up and tried to drink. I knew from the faint tinkling that no more than a few drops were left in it. He put the bottle down again, and stared past me.

Had I lost him?

I studied the worn face. How old was he? He looked about 60, but my gut told me he was much younger - perhaps mid-40s.

He’d been living rough for some time, that was certain. Too long? Perhaps he wouldn’t let me in. Perhaps—

“Jack.”

The listless eyes were focused on mine once more.

“Name’s Jack.”

Yes, he was the one. The one for today.

I held out my hand. “Nice to meet you, Jack,” I said. “I’m Lucy.”

He stared woozily at my hand for a moment, then took it.

And I stepped inside.

* * *

Another mind is another world, always. A neighbouring world, perhaps - or an alien one. I never know until I step inside. Each will have its own ecosystems, its own landscape, its own laws. Its own

crimes. Each will have its own private cosmos of failures and possibilities.

A whole other world.

But to begin with, all you get is a room. The place where they live.

Jack's room was stale with the stench of dank decay. I could see little in the dim light that struggled in through the grimy windows. The dust-thick air was dead and still. But it would be here somewhere.

Cautiously, I moved forward into the half-seen squalor of the room, my feet catching on indistinct objects that blocked my path.

Where had the trouble started?

I reached the window. Beyond the accumulated dust and cobwebs, I could

make out a slide, a swing, a treehouse. The scene lay, hushed and whole, the sun dappling onto it, golden through the leaves.

Clean. Unreachable, but clean.

Not there, then.

I moved back from the window, my fingers meeting the mouldering yellow wallpaper. They came away smelling musty. A skewed picture still clung to the clammy wall, though in many places, the paper itself shrank from it, sagging drearily towards the bare boards of the floor.

It would be here somewhere. It was *always* there, somewhere.

As I turned away, something cushioned my step. I stooped to examine it.

Paper. Tiny flakes of soft paper, damp now, the once-bright colours dimmed as the little hearts and horseshoes turned to a mulch on the floor.

I brushed the confetti from my fingers and moved on. My eyes were growing accustomed to the half-light now, and I could make out the forlorn shapes of a dust-shrouded table and chairs, a dresser, a settee. There was a carpet beneath my feet now, worn and faded.

This was a home, once.

I crossed to the dresser, my fingers skimming the frames of the pictures it held. Jack's wife looked radiant on their wedding day. He stood behind the lady in white, his arms encircling her, proud and protective. The next frame showed a

small boy pursuing a soccer ball with the dogged clumsiness of the four year old, while Jack held his hands, supporting, smiling. The frame after that held a lock of hair, the imprint of a tiny foot, and a pink ribbon.

So where *had* the trouble started?

Once more I moved on, away from the dresser, away from cheerless light of the window. There were darker shadows here. The carpet was gone, and my feet scraped on bare boards once more.

And then crunched.

Again I stooped. I took a pinch of the new substance, and watched the pale grit shower from my fingertips back to the floor.

Sand.

A glint caught my eye, and I picked up the silver disc. The sand coloured ribbon that bore it had three coloured stripes, and a dated clasp. As I turned it in my hand, the uncertain light picked out the embossed shapes: a winged beast with a human head, and beneath it, a single word: Iraq.

A little further on, I found another medal - cross-shaped this time, each of it's four arms bearing a crown, the ribbon white and purple. With a bar.

He had left as a husband and father.
He had returned a hero.

I moved on.

In the darkest corner of the room, I found the bed: rumpled, reeking of sweat

and nightmares. Empty - except for the sand.

Sand was everywhere. Infiltrating the sheets, smothering the floor boards, grinding in the pages of the book on the bedside table. Embedded beneath the glass of the wedding photo, now fragmented on floor, and coating the ownerless teddy bears that huddled beside it. From the broken glass of the picture, Jack's face reflected back at me, just as shattered.

A broken hero, trapped in his own, broken world.

Then came the bottles. Beer bottles at first, then whisky. Then methylated spirits.

And a grey, tattered coat. And a grey, greasy blanket for a grey, concrete street.

But it would be here. It was *always* there. Somewhere.

I looked once more around the desolate room, the wreckage of a ravaged life.

Somewhere. The key must be here *somewhere*.

Then the air stirred.

For the first time since I'd stepped inside, the air stirred, scattering the crystal sand from the forsaken teddies at my feet.

And then I remembered.

Crossing the room, I returned to my

first place at the window. And I found it: the picture that still clung crookedly to wall when the rest of Jack's life lay smothered in sand on the floor.

Within this final frame, a small boy and a smaller girl smiled, as their father's arms shielded them from harm.

I straightened the picture.

And the world changed.

It was only a glimmer at first, so faint you might think your eyes had tricked you. But it grew, and it strengthened. Soon, the picture glowed, and the light it shed into Jack's broken life was clean and pure.

It was only a beginning, of course. But it *was* a beginning.

Behind the despair, lies the hope. It's

always there. But you have to keep looking.

* * *

Back on the grey, cold street, Jack still held my hand. The rain had streaked his face, leaving clean trails on his cheeks.

Or perhaps it wasn't the rain.

His eyes met mine, grey like the sea, grey like the first hint of sunrise.

“Come on,” I said. “There’s a drop-in centre a few streets away. It’s a good one. You can get a hot meal, a shower, a change of clothes.” I smiled. “A change of more than your clothes. They have very good counsellors, and they know their way around the housing system.”

Jack pulled back a little.

“I don’t want charity.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Never asked anyone for anything.”

“You won’t have to ask,” I said.

I stood up, still holding his hand, and drew him to his feet.

“We all need a hand sometimes. You’ll pay it forward.”

* * *

They surround us every day - other minds, other worlds - thousands upon thousands of them. Each has its own ecosystem, its own landscape, its own laws. Each has its own cosmos of failures and possibilities.

Today, Jack was the one.

The one I could help.

About R.M. Fanshaw

R.M. Fanshaw writes adventure stories with a fantasy element, a dash of adventure, a hint of mystery, and a sprinkling of wit.

She is currently working on a collection of short stories and drafting Verdandi's Thread, a crossover/portal fantasy based in Norse mythology.

She's a full-time geek, and wishes you could get paid for that. Amongst the great loves of her life are books, trees, and the ocean - not forgetting tea and pizza! She's a huge fan of Doctor Who and NCIS, and is shamelessly addicted to her favourite band, The Piano Guys.

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