

At first, she only existed in the corner of my eye, in that part where nothing is quite real. I hesitated as long and as wide as a single breath, and then I turned to face the red haired woman, to see what she might look like... but all I caught was hair and the click of a well-turned heel. Still, this was enough to make me turn and begin walking behind her.

After a few minutes I began to convince myself that the woman might not have a face after all. Or that maybe she had the power to bend light away from my eyes... the flickering wreath of her shoulder-length hair dominated my vision. Hair the color of burning autumn leaves.

At every corner she leaned just enough to make my heart race in anticipation... and then all the mirrors revealed was that same reddish-orange cloud from a different angle. It became obvious quickly enough that she was too smart for my little mirror trick. I had to be satisfied with walking behind her as closely as possible.

All I could do was wait and hope that she would suddenly stop or turn around... but her step was brisk and full of purpose. The best chance, then, was if she turned around. If she stopped I would have to stop as well and turn around as quickly and covertly as possible. The probability of me pulling off such a maneuver without making a fool of myself was low at best. If she turned around, though, I could glance her way and perhaps our eyes would meet for a split second before I looked away and pretended to gaze at the subway posters.

As the red-haired woman and I walked together through the tunnels she missed a million opportunities to stop and never turned around even though I was much too close behind her. I began getting a little desperate. My impulse to see her face had grown into a need... Some stubborn switch had flipped, ...no going back.

Trash fluttered on the ground, endless numbers of commuters blurred past like so much skin and fabric, and I just kept walking. My sandal came loose and I tried to ignore it, but eventually I gave up

and stopped because my limp was only slowing me down. For a second I was afraid that I had lost her but I caught up soon enough, and we returned to a holding position with her in front and me trailing a few feet after.

Soon I memorized the way she looked from behind. Her legs were long, longer than the rest of her body, and the thick parts of her thighs looked like they might be as big around as my ankles. She was a very petite woman for being so tall. Her hips were not wide and the arc of their swing back-and-forth was short. Her jeans were worn so tightly I imagined she must have coated her legs with paste and applied them like wallpaper. From my vantage point she could have been anywhere from eighteen to fifty years old.

I began to wonder about the things I could not see. Were her eyes deep and tired or surrounded by webs of laugh-lines? Were her cheeks and chin sharp and pointed or soft and rounded?

Did she have freckles to match that hair or a cool, dry plain of skin free from blemish? Would a single look reveal her age or continue to build an illusion of youth? Would she smile at me if our eyes locked in that murky underground tunnel, or would I wither to the ground for trespassing where I should not? All of these thoughts came to a stop very suddenly when we met the next train. I followed as she

weaved through the waiting crowd, stopped in front of the gap and set down her suitcase. She

looked around and I surreptitiously glanced her way.

After so much waiting her face looked nothing like I imagined. What politeness I had left kicked in after a dreadful, breathless moment, and I glanced away. It had solved nothing, only created new mysteries. In my mind's eye her face was liquid and her hair made of snakes, but only my gaze turned to stone.

I stepped into one compartment on the train and she in one down the way. She continued towards her destination secure in the knowledge that I had nothing of hers. Nothing at all.

I sat down, leaned back, turned up my music... and settled in to finish the long ride downtown.



A Following by Jeff James

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