

The Quarry

by Christopher Peter

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I pocket the phone as I step away from the subway entrance. This will be an easy one.

He emerges from the apartment block at precisely ten o'clock, just as I'd been told. Tall, slightly bent; a faded gray. Even from twenty yards away he reeks of money. He strides towards Central Park with a ghost of a limp. He's holding a blue plastic bag.

I yawn and take another gulp of coffee as I follow him into the park. It's a dazzling day, cold and crisp. All blue, gold and copper. This is much better than being stuck in an office. Getting out, meeting people ... well, not quite *meeting* people. That's not really the idea.

Easy. You're obviously much less likely to be noticed in crowded spaces - and today the dappled paths are thronged with joggers and tourists. As usual I wonder why my bosses are interested in him. But they're interested in a lot of people, and never tell me why. Not my job to know.

He stops by the lake, rummages in his bag and begins to lob pieces of bread into the water. But the waterfowl cruise serenely by; must have been well fed today. I locate a reasonably dropping-free bench and settle down with a book. I always say the best way to look like you're reading something is to actually read. It's not like this old man is going to suddenly sprint out of sight if I look away for ten seconds.

You shouldn't look at them too much anyway. That's the secret (apart from not getting too close, as any idiot would realise). Just enough that you can see what they're doing, who they're talking to. You can even let them get out of sight for a few moments, if you're careful.

He slowly folds up the empty bag and puts it in his pocket. Then he turns round and looks at me.

Is he ...? *Yes*. Right at me. My nearest neighbor is ten yards to my left. A jogger runs between us. I stare at the book without seeing it. My eyes flick up. He's still looking. Staring. I can't make out an expression. Kind of ... blank. Then - a flicker of a smile?

He raises a thin hand.

Then he turns back to the lake, and stands motionless.

I swear under my breath and fumble the phone. This has never happened before. I can't quite believe it's happening now.

'Yeah?' crackles the phone.

'Kate?' I mutter. 'It's Steve. He's ... he's seen me.'

'What?' Her voice rises in disbelief. 'You sure?'

'Yeah. No doubt.'

'What the hell were you *doing*?'

'Nothing! I can't understand it.'

'OK.' Sigh. 'Abort. Get out of there.'

'Now? But ...'

'Go!'

I stand up, crushed. With one more furtive glance at the old man - still facing the other way, over the chill water - I walk away. Not too quickly; but after a while I pick up my pace. I furiously

rewind and review the preceding fifteen minutes. What had given me away? I just can't think. I've never screwed up like this before.

It's just as I'm crossing the street to the subway that I see him out of the corner of my eye. Bent, gray; ghost of a limp. Thirty yards behind me.

Can't be him. I check again as I round the corner and start to descend the steps. Definitely him. You learn to recognise in the briefest of glances in this line of work. The second look can betray you. I smile bitterly; as if it matters now.

How could he have caught up? He's got long, spidery legs. But he's old. And - *why?*

I review my options. Run, confront or ignore? They always say best to ignore, pretend you haven't noticed, unless you think you're in danger. But change your route, of course, don't give anything away. Lead them a dance.

But as the hot gale from the oncoming train buffets me on the platform, I'm consumed by a need to run. I glance at the steps I've just come down. No sign of him. I board the train. Senselessly relieved, I sink onto the seat. Kate will demand to know how I screwed up. But I'm *good* at this. Until today anyway.

The train sways and rumbles its way uptown. Towards home. I frown at my book, the world around me suddenly pointless.

I glance up. There's a shape at the far end of the carriage. I squint. Tall, gray; spidery legs. Staring straight ahead.

I want to shout. I almost confront. But I fight to calm myself. At the next station, I see a stationary train on the opposite platform, about to pull away. I spring up and, without looking across to my pursuer, swap trains. I'm gasping for breath and there's a bass drum going berserk inside my chest. I'm a jerk; but I've got away.

I bow my head, slumped on the seat. The lights flicker in the empty carriage. Someone coughs. An elderly, superior cough that somehow reeks of money. I look up. No-one.

Then I see the reflection in a window of deepest black.

I try to control my shaking hands as I put the phone to my ear.

'Kate? It's Mike. Look ...'

'Oh - Mike. Listen, I just heard from Nathan. He's at that guy's apartment. Cops are there.'

'Oh - yeah?'

'You can relax. Turns out it doesn't matter he spotted you.'

'What - what do you mean?'

'He must have gone right back there as soon as you left.'

'What? But ...'

'Found on the floor by the maid. You must have really freaked him out, Mike.'

'Kate?' The phone's crackling rises to a crescendo, drowning her voice. 'Kate!' Then it cuts off, leaving only the silence of the carriage.

The cough comes again. Closer.

And a dry, thin voice. 'You wanted me?'

The lights flicker once more; and die.