

Encounters in the Temple of Mediocrity.

Maria Arena

What is there to learn from a stranger in two hundred metres of shopping centre car park? On a usual day, perhaps: how to be rude to people who get in your way; or how to fail at parking your car while inconveniencing everyone else around you; or how to pretend you and the person you're talking to on your mobile phone are the only inhabitants of the planet. Agreed, such lessons are invaluable to the human experience, but they are also the reason why, on usual days, I avoid shopping centres unless I've been suitably tranquillised before facing the madding crowd. Luckily, I have a stash of little blue friends left over from the time before now.

On other days – say, for example, when a girl remembers that she really ought to eat and the cupboards are tragically bare – on those days, there's 'The Plan'.

Phase one of The Plan is the easiest to implement: park within viewing distance of the shopping centre but as far away from everyone else as possible. Phase two: wear a hat, sunglasses, and my iPod—turned off since the songs remind me of the time before now. Move towards the entry along the line of least human prevalence even if this means an extra five minutes of weaving and circumventing; bop head as though listening to music. Phase three: enter the building, make no eye contact, move with purpose, don't stop. Get in, get what you need, get out. Simple.

I've become an expert at executing The Plan over the last seventeen months, three weeks, four days, and fifteen hours. I can move through the mundane masses like an atom. Touching nothing, I carry out my task in the series of moments that make up my life as it is now.

That's on a usual day.

Today, it's a kid who brings The Plan undone. A dark-haired, smooth-cheeked, brown-eyed boy of about three, sending out a beacon of laughter as he cartwheels before his mother. My attention is captured. A smile rises to my lips like a sunken ship ghosting to the

surface, covered in barnacles, eaten by salt: a home to dark, ferocious things. Surprised, I jerk my head away from his happy face and catch the gaze of a stranger. He is smiling at the boy too, but as our eyes meet, his widen. Recognition floods his features, pulling open his mouth, lifting his brow, which crashes down an instant later on the reef of his doubt.

‘Are you that woman from a few months ago?’ he asks.

No, I’m not her. She’s dead.

The thought bursts out of the blackness that is the time before now, and I fight it off, shoving and slapping it back into the depths where it belongs. *Damn it Suz, this is what happens when you don’t stick to The Plan.* The stranger is staring at me, the expression on his sun-browned face turning quizzical.

‘Not me,’ I manage.

‘Sorry,’ he says, spreading his hands before him. They are lean, strong hands; a trait I find appealing in men, no matter their age. ‘Thought you might be the woman who helped me with that girl back ‘round Christmas time.’ His voice is deep and resonant; I like that trait too.

‘Christmas time?’ I feel a lurch inside. *How did you miss that, Suz?* ‘Um, I wasn’t here for Christmas this year.’

‘Guess it wasn’t you then,’ he says, and smiles for me. The movement creates deep creases at the corner of his eyes and the sides of his mouth; he’s a man accustomed to happiness, it seems. ‘Sorry to bother you.’

‘No problem,’ I reply as we pass through the entry into the afternoon.

Free to return to The Plan, I take half a step away from him. I’ve been polite, the conversation is over; I could leave, get away from the chattering press of humanity, back to my refuge, my silence. *Yes, Suz, follow The Plan. Keep safe. Stay sane.* ‘What happened to the girl?’ I ask.

Suz?

A mother, looking as harassed as a stripper at a buck’s night, charges between us followed by her brood of squawking children, each of them oblivious to all but their own drama; the stranger and I could be just two more ghosts in the world. The smallest child, all peachy-skin and sunshine, veers towards *La Joie de Ciel*, the French bakery near the entry, drawn by the aroma of sweet pastries.

‘Brittany, come on,’ the mother bawls at her as though the shopping centre is her living room rather than a public space.

‘But, Mum—’

‘Now, for God’s sake.’

There is no patience or respect in the woman's tone, and I wonder if she realises how loveless she sounds? Something tugs inside my chest—*Careful, Suz*—as the girl sends a wistful glance at the bakery before plodding after her siblings.

When the sliding doors have cut off their ruckus, the man crosses the space between us, closing the gap to a congenial distance. His proximity pulls my attention from the family, and I shuffle back a step as he says, 'I heard her hollering from in there.' He hooks a thumb towards the heart of shopping centre. 'And though there were a whole lota people who heard her too, none of them did a thing. Just stared through the doors, like it was some sort of reality TV show they were watching instead of a woman in trouble.'

A woman in trouble? Is that someone we know, Suz? A thin layer of sweat squeezes out of my skin, slick and uncomfortable. I wipe my hand on the back of my shorts, which sag over my hips, and I frown as I adjust them, thinking: *Nope, no-one I know.*

The stranger's giving me that quizzical look again, which I decline to acknowledge by turning towards the car park. He falls into step beside me, and I hear him draw a question-laden breath but, before he can speak, he's cut-off by a boy on a skateboard who whizzes by, leaving an air of copious energy and mysterious potential swirling in his wake. I sneak a glance at the stranger, catching the introspective look he sends after the boy. I know that expression and the feeling behind it; the imposing on a body of a future no longer possible.

Curious, I ask, 'What sort of trouble was the woman in?'

We stroll towards a pedestrian crossing, which is—in my reckoning—the ultimate symbol of the mentality that pervades these suburban temples of excess. *Cross here, my little sheep*, those lines say. *Cross here where it's safe.*

That's a lie, of course: an illusion. Nowhere is safe, not when destruction waits in the space between each breath.

Nowhere except home, Suz. We're safe there, remember.

Yes—little blue friends notwithstanding.

Don't think about that, Suz.

Okay.

On usual days, I don't use pedestrian crossings; I cross wherever I damn well please as long as it's the quickest route back to my car. Sometimes, to amuse myself as I navigate the car park, I wish for ruby slippers—*car, car, car!*—or one of those transporters from *Star Trek*, but the wishing never lasts long. My faith in technology vanished in the time before now, and I've stopped believing in magic.

The traffic pulls up, impatient drivers eyeballing us. I notice that the stranger steps over the spaces between the white lines. There's a childlike grin on his face as he glances at the waiting cars. On the other side, he says, 'This bloke was trying to yank her kid out of her arms.'

'Seriously?'

'Yep, and the little was bawling her head off, terrified sounding, you know? And all those people just watching.' His disgust is evident in the shake of his head. 'So I stepped in to help 'em out.'

'Really?'

He laughs. 'Yeah, I know, old bloke like me, taking on a young whelp, but there's a bit of fire in the blood yet.' He gives me a wink. 'Most days, anyway.'

I feel my ship-wrecked smile stirring again and flick my gaze away, over the car park. I like the line of vehicles, locked in their symmetrical bays: immobile, controlled. 'What did you do?' I ask.

'Threw him up against the wall over there,' he says, indicating a spot beside the French bakery. 'Held him there while someone called the police.'

'Oh,' I say, my heart quickening.

I've always been a sucker for male heroics. My mother blames my father for filling my pre-adolescent head with his stories of battling fires and rescuing damsels in distress. 'None of that guff's true,' I remember her saying after dinner one evening as she took the dinner plates from my father and stacked them in the dishwasher. 'What he really does is squirt water on pretend fires and play with his hose all day.'

When my mother bent to program the machine, my father sent a wink in my direction. 'That's not all us firemen like to play with,' he said, smacking her on the rump. I remember my father's laughter rumbling through the house, and the helpless tears that rolled down my face as he dodged the random missiles that my mum fired into his orbit.

Later, in the difficult years of their marriage, my father argued that my need for a hero had nothing to do with him and everything to do with my mother's discovery of radical feminism. 'No wonder the girl wants to be rescued,' he'd mutter as my mother lectured me on the need to re-write our family 'her-story'.

They were wrong, of course. I didn't want to be rescued. What I wanted was what they had in each other: a soul mate for the best, and worst, of times. I guess they finally understood that on the day I introduced them to my last boyfriend.

Suz? Remember how we feel about memories. Best to stay in the present.

The present?

I glance at the new hero I've unexpectedly encountered. We've moved away from the crossing and into a lane of parked cars. He tosses me a smile. 'Back now?'

A blush rushes into my cheeks. 'Sorry. I was thinking of my father. You remind me of him.'

'A compliment?'

'Yeah.'

'Must be quite a guy.'

My shoulders twitch a shrug. 'Did the young bloke give you much trouble while you waited for the police?' I ask, steering the conversation back to him

That cocky smile again; he could be George Clooney's older brother. 'He had a go, trying to head butt me and all, but I looked him dead in the eyes and told him plain, "Quit it, mate. I've shot better blokes than you." That pulled him up short,' he says, with a chuckle.

I watch the stranger, wondering what sort of man could say such a thing? I sense no dishonesty in his words, no pointless bragging. Was he ex-police or maybe ex-military? My eyes follow the line of his jaw and move over his features. There's no arrogance or false bravado in his face. What man of his vintage would risk his safety to protect another? *A good man*, I decide. *A good man like—*

No you don't, Suz. Leave him in the time before now.

—my father. I was going to say, like my father.

At least, he was good the last time I saw him in the weeks after the time before now. I remember him and Mum, sad and stoic, standing either side of me like deep-rooted oak trees, their branches entwined over my head, sheltering, protecting. Not that it helped; I was already ploughed into the ground, down where it was dark and pungent, where the worms grew long and fat on the remains of my life.

I remember my father reaching for me, trying to coax me out of the hole I had willingly tumbled into—like Alice except with intention. I remember him saying, as the days blurred into a dull twilight, 'You have to let go, Susannah. We're still here for you.'

I remember looking into the eyes that had watched over me since the moment of my birth and saying, 'For how long, Dad? How long before you and Mum are snatched away? Then what? More of this?' I pressed a hand to my chest, feeling the strange erratic rhythm that was less heartbeat and more frantic creature flinging itself at the bars of a cage. 'No thanks. This—' the hand brushed over my chest again, '—this is more than enough for me.'

He saw me some time later, at this very shopping centre, but I was engrossed in phase three of The Plan. Not even the sudden tears that misted his eyes brought me to a stop. I had to get out, to get away from the myopic mob, with their overflowing shopping trolleys and conversations that started with, ‘Did you watch *My Kitchen Rules* last night—’

My father let me go; he knows the value of a good cliché.

‘Guess he wasn’t so tough after all, huh?’ I say, wondering if we’re close to the stranger’s car. There’s a mustard coloured jeep, beaten to all hell, two rows over on the diagonal. *That’s a safe bet*, I think, expecting he’ll say his goodbyes and slip away between the cars at any moment, but he remains beside me.

‘Most people aren’t as tough as they make out,’ he says, and I glance at him sharply, but he’s nodding encouragement to a young man who’s wrestling with a line of wayward shopping carts. The kid scowls and shoves at the trolleys, his secret desire written across his face.

‘Did he give the police much trouble?’

The stranger shakes his head. ‘I’d let him go by then.’

A crevice opens across the car park; a deep, black slash swallowing cars and trolley boys, potted palm trees, and daylight. My toes are on the edge and the asphalt is crumbling. I feel myself tipping forward even though I resist for all I am worth, pin-wheeling my arms, fighting not to look. In response, the crevice widens and lengthens; the shopping centre rips in half and drops into the abyss, taking shoppers, summer specials, and a bank of ATMs with it. The sound is horrendous: sirens and screaming. A bloody rotating light rises out of the depths, trying to hypnotise me, but I will not look. I will not.

Hey Suz, did you remember to get bandaids, and camomile tea, and detergent, and some endives too? Oh, and we need foie gras.

Foie gras? Do they even sell that in the supermarket?

Yeah, Suzy-q, in aisle four, remember, where they keep all the grief-free foods.

Grief-free?

I mean, guilt-free.

Ah-huh.

A tank-sized four-wheel drive barrels past. Hot air and fumes slap at my face like a reality check. I catch the driver staring down at me from his lofty air-conditioned cocoon. A misguided hatred fills my stomach: *Jerk*, I think, wishing the abyss was real.

That’s the way, Suz. Keep that fire burning.

A frown pulls at my brow as I return my gaze to the stranger. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘He asked me too. Said there was stuff he needed to take care of at home before the coppers took him away. He was rambling by then, the panic you know, but there was something about his mum and a dog, and how things would go worse for the girl and their kid if he didn’t fix things before he got rolled.’

‘Sounds like a story to me,’ I say, as we reach the end of the row of cars.

‘Sure it was, but he was getting real antsy, and I figured the girl knew where the coppers could find him, so why not let him go before things got any uglier.’

The stranger steps onto a traffic island, and I step up with him. An elderly couple have been following us, their shopping trolley rattling like a hurricane. As they pass, the men nod to each other; not in friendship—there’s no recognition in their eyes—but in acknowledgement of an achievement of years. The couple trundle on, so close to each other they could be Siamese twins, and vanish between the cars.

Before I can start to dwell on the last time I was that close to someone, the man says, ‘What I didn’t know, but the girl told me later, was that he was going home to get rid of his drug stash. He was a dealer, you see. And I’ll tell you this for nothing, if I’d known that when I had him up against that wall, I would’ve dropped him for sure.’ He lifts his fists and, when I see the mountain range of his knuckles, I know the young bloke got off easy.

A removalist van crawls past, throwing a shadow over us. The temperature seems to drop; the tension seeps away and, as the van moves along, the stranger relaxes. His eyes roam the parking area, perhaps searching for his elusive vehicle. The lull in our conversation offers an opportunity for a graceful departure—*Yes, time to go, Suz*—but as I go to step off the island, the man touches my arm, and I am arrested.

It has been seventeen months, three weeks, four days, and three hours since anyone touched me. I don’t know what to do. My skin is freezing except where his fingers have pressed; there the skin blazes like a brand. My stomach churns, but my mouth is cotton wool dry. I want to tremble, but my body is fixed in time and space. There are tears that I can’t cry pushing against my eyes.

Seriously, Suz, it’s—

‘I lost my boy to drugs,’ the stranger says. His voice is mellow, but I recognise the undercurrent of grief, of questioning.

The time before now looms up in my mind; that black crevice out of which crawls all my nightmares. I want to dash to my car and drive away, back to my apartment, where all

evidence from the time before now has been obliterated; where the walls are bare of photographs, and no whimsical knick-knacks line the shelves; where there is a single bed and a single chest of drawers and only one of everything: plate, cup, knife, fork, spoon, towel; where there are no people to remind me of things like love and joy, loss and death; where there is me, and the silence of my life as it is now.

Instead of running, I hear myself say, 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

The stranger inclines his head. 'It's over with now but thank you.' He starts off through the car park again, but I hesitate, wondering how he can be so blasé about the death of his son. The sound of his voice pulls at me, and I take a few quick steps to catch up to him. 'We got the girl into one of those shelters for abused women, her and the little. Few days later, we got a phone call from her.'

'Ah,' I say, knowing what's coming. Those girls never learn from their mistakes. They go back for more punishment, thinking they deserve the pain and loving the drama that comes with such a relationship. They have so little love for themselves, those girls.

So true, Suzy-q. Haven't they heard of self-preservation? Don't they know the value of being alone? The safety of oneness?

The stranger looks at me. 'I know what that "ah" means,' he says, shaking his head, 'but you're wrong. We thought it too, the wife and me, but when that girl rang, it was to say thank you, and to tell us that she and the little had settled into the shelter, and that they were safe. She said, "I'm not afraid anymore, William."'

He comes to a stop. My car is a dozen paces away, a rusting relic that I brought to replace the shiny Beamer I owned in the time before now. I sold it cheap, with all of its accessories, including the rainbow-coloured butterfly mobile hanging from the roof over the backseat.

William presses his hand against my forearm with a gentle but insistent pressure, demanding my attention. I look at him as the shock of his touch races through my body again, but it is his words that rob me of breath.

'And that's what it's all about,' he says and turns away.

Social convention takes over, and I hear myself saying 'goodbye' and 'thank you' as we separate even though the pleasantries don't come from my heart. I hurry to my car and stop at the door, the keys poised before the lock, but I can't think beyond William's parting words. Somewhere nearby, an ambulance siren warbles, providing an excuse to look up and scan the car park. William is nowhere to be seen.

That's a good thing, Suz. The old guy was a bit much, don't you think? Who tells a stranger all that stuff, walking across a car park? Weird. But he's gone now, so get in the car and lets go home. Okay Suz, what'd you say, back to our citadel—

The ambulance draws closer, howling across the afternoon. A moment later, it flashes past, and I find my hand clutching at my throat. *Let them be okay*, I beg. *Let them live.*

But they didn't Suz, they didn't live. You know that.

I know—

Above my car, a sodium light flicks on, bathing me in its stark orange glow. I ram my keys into the lock, yank the door open, swing into the driver's seat, and slam the door shut. The cry of the ambulance recedes to a faint whine, fading, fading, gone.

Home, Suzy-q, home to where we're not afraid, alright?

Yes.

I start the car, slip the shift into reverse and wait for a group of plebeians to negotiate the lane behind me. As they pass, something catches my eye in my rear view mirror: the woman is holding a cake box from *La Joie de Ciel*.

A breath fills my chest and escapes with a memory. In the time before now, on the last Saturday of the month, my mother would make the trip to the bakery and buy two pieces of something special for each of us who would gather with her and my father for afternoon tea. My father, his masculinity tested by the dainty cakes and pretty slices, would make jokes as he sipped from the delicate teacup, but we knew he secretly appreciated the gatherings, and that he was addicted to the passionfruit palmiers my mother brought especially for him.

Ready Suz?

With the rear of the car free of plodding pedestrians, I pull into the lane and drive towards the shopping centre.

Ah, wrong way, Suz. The exit is that way.

I pull up in front of *La Joie de Ciel* and look through the window. The shelves are almost empty at this time of the day, and I can see they've sold out of palmiers. Part of me sighs in relief, but another part is thinking ahead to Saturday and wondering if I have the patience and strength to implement The Plan twice in one week.