Subsisting

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The question didn’t seem to reach the old man at first, so the young woman asked it again, a little louder. The old man’s eyes moved from the sea and came to rest on the pavement at his feet. His eyes were somber and as ashen as the sidewalk. The young woman stood, marking time. She was turning to walk away when the old man cleared his throat.

Despite the effort, his utterance rattled like the opening of some forgotten chest. He spoke slowly and deliberately, and paused between each thought—between each sentence—as if he had only so many left, and each one counted.

The young woman winced at the sound.

I was born three months after my mother landed here in America. She crossed the Atlantic in 1904. February. I believe someone famous died that year.

The young woman stood squinting at what the Atlantic and 1904 had to do with her question. Her hands smoothed the front of a smart navy suit and tucked a strand of low-maintenance hair behind an ear. She was a handsome woman of twenty-seven, who looked thirty-five for an absence of make-up and an abundance of aspiration.

They had to take her straight to a hospital from the boat. She was . . . sick. The pregnancy. She had me and then died in 1910. I was alone in Boston until I was old enough to hop a train to Chicago. I liked Boston, I suppose. I was a kid. I didn’t pay much attention to it—I guess I liked it. I suppose I just grew out of it.

The old man sat on a wooden bench at the end of the park opposite the playground and the parking lot. He was separated from the beach by only the sidewalk and a raised curb, over which the gray sand had spilled. It freckled the pavement like liver spots. The cries of the neighborhood children could be heard in the distance.

In Chicago I had a job and a girl, but she died in 1929.

The young woman continued to squint at the old man’s train of thought.
She presumed he subsisted in one of those arthritic little houses on Allana Drive, near the park, where most of the town's elderly people lived. She imagined his home, dim and cluttered, silent, saw the inevitable presence of a pet cat named Theodore, or Jack. Pets irritated the young woman. They were a sure sign of a dependence on companionship.

The old man shook his head. His twisted hands moved to his knees. The young woman looked at the thumbs, short and square, the knuckles larger than they should have been. An intricately hand-carved cane rested against the inside of his leg. On the weathered bench was his knife, on its side, one of the shorter blades extended toward the young woman. His voice broke her gaze.

_I remember her eyes . . . green . . . alive. They never seemed to focus for too long a time. She was beautiful . . . and young._

His whiskered grin subsided.

_But I haven't been able to remember her last name. I went back to Chicago . . . I told you she died?_  

The old man lifted his head.

It was the first time he had moved his eyes from the pavement, and he settled them on the young woman. She returned his look, detecting a shade of longing that for an instant, she comprehended. She noticed how hollow his cheeks were, seeming to hang with little hope of hanging on much longer. And his forehead was salt- and sun-beaten. The young woman shook her head to clear it and returned to her waiting, curious to see if the old man would answer her question. She had left the office late this evening and on the way home crossed the ocean park to ask it. She told herself that she felt sorry for the old man, that he was lonely and that that was why she stayed, why she waited—because he needed her.

But his sentences were becoming more sporadic and isolated.

_I stayed in Chicago for a long time. Lived through the Depression, the Second Big War . . . I suppose I lived through just about everything._

At this the old man resurrected a laugh that resembled a light coughing spell. He wiped his mouth, recovered.

_I finally left the year Roosevelt died. 1963 when I went back. Couldn't remember her name. It was too late . . . Boston was too far away. I was tired._

As if to emphasize the fatigue, he exhaled, and the young woman looked to the children heavily involved in their games and laughter, oblivious to anyone outside their barkdust-bordered playground. An island on the far side of a sea of
grass, the playground was always moving, alive, ever-populated. The young woman walked alone every day past the park and the children, but this had been the first time she'd noticed the old man on the bench, and something inside her had leapt.

_I lived in Utah for awhile... New Mexico. I think I lasted six years in Nevada. I wasn't comfortable... didn't know anyone. I was working, of course—one has to be working. It... helps..._

The young woman felt a chill and noticed the loss of light, the graying of evening. It had been a beautiful day for October, a beautiful day for the playground.

_I was seventy-six when I finally settled here. No more work. I started coming down here because I was bored._

He grinned.

_I watch the children... the ocean..._

As the old man's voice disseminated, he looked up a second time, his eyes supplicating and wet. The young woman nibbled at the inside of her cheek, her forehead creased, now cold. The cries of the children filled the distant gray.

She hadn't moved since the old man first cleared his throat, and she now noticed the stiffness in her knees, the soreness in her feet. Her arches ached in her navy pumps. As she rocked from side to side, taking inventory, she remembered her father—now sixty-three—and the two back surgeries, the pins in his hip. She had the urge to run, to force the stiffness from her legs. She watched a little girl in an orange wind-breaker skip to a bright Suburban.

The air was heavy. A frost was coming.

"Okay, well... thank you," she said, clearing her throat. "You have a good evening—and don't freeze yourself to death!"

The young woman smiled and started to back away, shrugging her shoulders against the cold on her neck. She turned to walk, her eyes on the sand-freckled pavement.

"Thank you—" he said.

_It was almost inaudible, maybe imagined, coming from an old chest now buried in an unraveled scarf. "—It's twenty minutes after seven."_

But the young woman didn't hear the old man's answer. She hurried her stride, twenty paces closer to home. She looked up only when the park lights came on, just before crossing the street.

_A penetrating breeze chased after the children, parents arrived to carry them back to their bedrooms, and the old man turned to watch until the last child_
scrambled into a station wagon. Half-immersed in the sea, the sun cooled to a burnt orange in the undulating blue, and the crispness of the coming frost floated in with the tide.

The old man was alone in the park. He struggled to his feet. Shuffling over the curb and out to the darker sand, he stood facing the sea and the sunset.

Almost home, the young woman dug her arms into her ribs. Her ears were numb. She approached her steps, counting the cracks, and thought of the old man in the park. At her door she turned, as if in answer to a familiar voice, and watched the last of the day slide behind the sea. She backed into an empty house. She checked the thermostat, then pushed up her navy sleeve and looked at her watch. Seven-thirty.

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J.P. Steed graduated in December of 1995. He plans to earn an MFA in creative writing. In his spare time he likes to build furniture.