

# Insanely Beautiful

Penn Station in Baltimore can be a pretty bustling place on a Sunday evening. Trains racing up and down the eastern seaboard pick up and deposit passengers who are returning from their weekend excursions to Miami, Washington DC, Philadelphia, New York, and God knows where else. As I turned my little rental car into the train station from St. Paul Street, I was immediately stopped dead by the conga line of cars sitting in the drop off/pick up lane. Another line of cars merging from the Charles Street entrance created an unintentional parking lot on this tiny strip of asphalt.

I had no time to work out an alternate plan. My subject was in the train station and I had to catch him before he slipped onto a train and disappeared on me again. With keys still in the ignition, I bolted from the vehicle and ran toward the Beaux-Arts style building. Someone could move the car or even steal it for all I cared. My main focus was on that scared little man inside.

Before I got to the station, I had doused myself with every little perfume sample I had in my purse, hoping to change my scent. Still, he detected me as soon as I entered the terminal. He was sitting on a wooden bench at the very end, no doubt seeking the darkest part of the cavernous space. Shivering and clutching tightly to his wrap-around sunglasses, he lifted his head in my direction. I made no attempt to hide. It was too late

for any cat-and-mouse games now. I stepped slowly toward him, my muscles tensed with anticipation should he choose to run out the nearest exit door for the platform below.

The Baltimore Penn Station is quaint when compared to some of its sibling stations along the Northeast Corridor and reminds me of a place out of *Blade Runner*. Industrial Age architecture dotted with points of modernity. Marble walls and wooden benches alongside the sleek information desk and the brushed aluminum monoliths marking the platform exits. The old schedule signboard, with metal number cards that clackety-clacked as they turned over to reveal the latest train times, had recently been replaced with a new digital one. The atmosphere seemed so appropriate since I felt like I had walked into my own sci-fi drama.

My subject, who had been using the name Horatio Zaman, made no attempt to escape as I approached him. Tears streamed down his slender, porcelain face and his black hair looked greasy and unkempt. Under different circumstances, he could be quite handsome, but at this moment, he sat broken and emotionally spent.

“Mr. Zaman,” I said softly, standing only a few paces from him. “May I speak with you?”

He never acknowledged me, rocking back and forth on the bench with his eyes focused on the floor. Cautiously, I sat down next to him.

“It’s quite loud in here,” he said to me.

I looked around at the people scurrying up and down the terminal. “Yes it is. I can’t imagine how it sounds to you.”

“Like an avalanche,” he replied. “All this marble and metal. Nothing to dampen the sound.”

“Would you like to go back to my car?”

Zaman sniffed. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m here to take you in,” I stated. “That is going to happen, believe me. I think my car will be quieter and darker. You would be more comfortable.”

The frail man remained quiet, as if unwilling to accept his future. Perhaps he truly did not believe that his future lied here. We just sat there quietly for several minutes. I was in no hurry, and I preferred that he come quietly rather than with a struggle. Finally, he leaned back and chuckled.

“I knew this time could be so beautiful,” he said. “I wanted so much to see it. I yearned for that beauty so deeply, I never thought any bad could come from it. I was blinded to that.”

“We have a saying, the grass is always greener on the other side.”

He laughed louder. Not very loud, but loud for his soft voice. “That’s quite good. I can honestly say we do not have that saying in my time.”

When this case started, I didn’t expect to like this man. Back then, he was a vague outline of a figure, like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. His grainy image had been spotted in a photograph of an enormous electrical explosion near Pittman, New Jersey. Many thought the phenomenon was a rare example of ball lightning created by a thunder storm which had occurred that night, but some experts in DC thought otherwise. Moreover, no one could understand how a human being could be standing so close to the explosion and appear unharmed.

Later, reports began to surface of an odd character moving across New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Then the name Horatio Zaman surfaced on some fake IDs. I was assigned

by my supervisor to tail this Mr. Zaman. He surfaced again at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore.

“They gonna fry me?” Zaman asked, his voice cracking. “Isn’t that what they call it here? You fry the bastard.”

“I don’t know what will happen,” I replied, honestly. Law enforcement was not my area. The agency for whom I worked mainly dealt with terrorist activity, but we were occasionally asked to help other branches of Homeland Security with cases they were not entirely equipped to handle, like strange little men who seem resistant to massive electrical explosions of unknown origin. “I do know that you are safer coming with me than remaining on the run.”

Zaman managed a smirk. “Are you sure? I’ve given you the slip before, so how much faith can I have in you?”

“Fair enough,” I conceded. “And you have done surprisingly well so far as a stranger in a strange land, but there are dangers on the outside you have no way of understanding. You leave this building and walk just a few blocks from here, you’ll find yourself in some extremely rough territory.”

“I wasn’t walking out there.” Zaman snarled in a mocking tone. “I’m taking a train all the way to the place called Miami, Florida.”

“No matter where you go, you are facing unknowns. At least I know who you are. I understand your situation. Let me help you.”

He snickered. “You act like I came from the womb. My time is not a glorious paradise. Weather changes from brutal cold to sweltering heat in seconds. Hurricanes and blizzards are commonplace, not big events like you have here, today. The sky is

perpetually gray, the food is often laced with poisons even when grown under the best conditions.”

“I know that now. I spoke to Dr. Glass before you – before he died.”

“You were going to say ‘killed him,’ weren’t you?” Zaman removed his sunglasses and locked his large onyx eyes on me. “It was an accident, but I know no one will understand. Dr. Glass would’ve understood, I’m certain of that. I’m sure he has forgiven me.”

Zaman was becoming more agitated. To avoid him making a scene, I had to find some way to calm him down. “Why did you want to go to Miami?”

“It was the farthest point away from Baltimore that I could take the train to,” he replied, but then added. “It has everything my time does not. Bright sun, blue sky, beaches of white sand and blue ocean water. I had watched videos and pictures. There are other beautiful places I know, but Miami represents everything I wanted to find here. I know it’s a risk even going there, but I have to try.”

There was no doubt in his voice; he was intent on reaching Miami and apparently I posed no threat to him. Perhaps my cautious behavior made him think I was soft, but I was only trying to contain his temper which grew by the day. Excessive stimulation of his heightened senses was taking a toll on his psyche. I realized something was amiss when Zaman started seeing Dr. Glass at the Johns Hopkins Brain Science Institute.

Dr. Glass explored the connections between senses and brain function. After Zaman and Glass started meeting regularly, I decided it was time to interview the doctor. Initially, he hid behind doctor-patient confidentiality, but when I promised not to interfere with their sessions, the doctor finally opened up. Zaman wanted to see if, in exchange for

sharing his brain with the doctor, Dr. Glass could help deaden Zaman's senses so he could function. The doctor had no immediate procedures that could work on Zaman, but the challenge was too irresistible to pass up and Glass started developing experiments based on theories he held.

"What happened with Dr. Glass?" I asked, throwing caution to the wind and hoping that he was ready to come clean with me.

"I told you," Zaman muttered, through gritted teeth.

"Yes, I know, 'an accident.' But if you can explain the exact nature of the accident, I'm sure there are people in Washington who will be sympathetic. We're not all barbarians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

Zaman sighed, "It had been an especially stressful day. Bright sunshine. Deafening road construction around the hospital. It was a chore just to get to Dr. Glass's office. He told me he had this new experiment planned. It required strapping me down to an examination table. He put goggles on me and headphones. It was all quite uncomfortable and claustrophobic."

"I understand claustrophobia," I said. "Go on."

"I suppose it was some sort of total immersion therapy. Bombard me with enough light and sound at steadily increasing levels and my senses would adjust. Well, they wouldn't. I was already extremely irritable. The bonds weren't very tight and my instinct to flee was quite strong. I broke from the bonds and flew into a rage. He was dead before I even realized what had happened."

"Look, I can't promise anything, but you are a rare individual. Your mere existence in this time is of monumental scientific importance to our scientists today. Just

learning how you survived that explosion in New Jersey would be of tremendous interest, I'm sure."

Zaman studied me with contempt. "I could never reveal the nature of our time distortion technology. It would throw off the entire continuum."

His concern for the time continuum seemed absurd to me given that his mere presence in our age must be a risk, but I was in no position to argue. "Nevertheless," I continued. "I'm fairly certain no one is going to simply throw you in a prison."

"But I could never be a free man," he countered. "It was stupid to ever come here. I know that now. Just let me disappear. I won't bother anyone ever again."

Glancing at the schedule board at the other end of the terminal, I noticed that Zaman's train was due to arrive in four minutes. "I tell you what. Your train should be here soon. Why don't we get on that train together and we can talk some more."

My fancy Federal ID could easily swing me passage on the train, and I was hoping that I could talk him into getting off at the stop in Washington. If not...well, I wasn't sure. I could use force on the man, even though he had already shown an aptitude for physical violence. On the other hand, I could just let him see Miami after all, and then bring him back. There was really no urgency provided I kept him close.

Zaman put his sunglasses back on and stared at the floor again. "I don't know. It's all such a mess. I don't know what to do."

"It would be foolish to run anymore."

A garbled, bellowing announcement for the arriving train emanated from the p.a. system and echoed off the bare walls and floor. Zaman cupped his ears and rocked frantically.

“What do you say, Horatio?”

Still rocking, Zaman offered a shaky nod. I took his elbow and led him down the stairs to the platform below like he was an 80-year-old man. The aging platform seemed like little more than a slab of crumbling concrete as we stood waiting for the train to emerge from the darkness surrounding us. At first, the baleful moan of the horn reached us, seemingly from everywhere. I could feel Zaman’s arm quivering in response to the noise. Then a round disc of white light appeared to our north, growing steadily larger and brighter. The horn blasted once again.

The tiny man from the distant future pulled himself erect and shifted his body toward the approaching light. Taking off his sunglasses, he stepped closer to the edge of the platform and turned his saucer-shaped eyes of inky blackness directly toward the train.

“Mr. Zaman?” I cried, taking a firmer grasp of his arm.

As the light flooded the area around the platform and the rumbling noise of the diesel engines surrounded us, I could see Zaman’s lips moving, but could not hear a word.

“What are you saying?” I yelled over the din.

Heaving deeply, he exhaled, “It’s so incredibly beautiful!”

His arm yanked roughly from my grip. By the time I had steadied myself, his frail form hit the tracks some 15 feet below. The train arrived a split second later. Hundreds of passengers were not going to reach their destinations by train that night.