

Divergent

Last Sunday, before moving out of my old place, I went to go buy bread for dinner — my first meal of the day — at around 5:30pm. The grocery store I usually go to was closed, so I turned around to go further up the street, and then as I walked towards it I decided to turn left and walk for an hour and a half to the City's Philharmonic. If I walked really, really quickly — basically if I ran — I might be able to get there by 6:30pm, which is when standing room tickets would go on sale for the night's show. The lady at the box office the day before (Saturday), when the same show was playing at 8pm and I showed up at 7:50, told me that standing room tickets sell out really quickly, so it's good to show up a little earlier than 6:30 because a line forms.

So I kind of ran. It was freezing cold on Sunday. The temperatures have started dropping. It's been an unusually mild winter so far in the City (everyone is saying), but now the temperatures are dropping. It's getting serious. Anyway the City's Phil was just way too far away to run to and along the way I stumbled across a really interesting courtyard. I had to stop.

The courtyard was filled with a strange three-dimensional structure and I poked in and out of it a bit. There were information plaques around; they were in a language that I couldn't read. I had to stop and read them. There was graffiti and notes pasted on top of the information plaques. There was one piece of graffiti that said something in the City's language. I didn't really get it, but I kind of got it, and for some reason I felt like memorizing it and keeping it in my head, so I spent a few minutes leaving it and remembering it and walking back to check if I had

remembered it properly, and now I get it, and I didn't even have to use a dictionary and — whatever.

Anyway, I didn't get to the City's Phil before 6:30pm. Actually, I got there at more like 7. Ah, oops. Kind of embarrassing, but I walked in grinning. The same lady is at the box office as the night before. The same charming security guard. I'm not sure if he recognizes me, but he tells me standing room tickets are sold out. He tells me if I come back to the box office 5-10 minutes before the show there might be some tickets free from returns or no-shows.

“Or...” he says reluctantly, “You can wait outside. Sometimes people sell tickets out front. But make sure the tickets are real — those guys can be wicked. And wait... they will get cheaper right before the show.”

Well, why not. I go and wait out front. There is another woman already waiting here, holding a sign that reads “TICKET WANTED” in the City's language. I have no sign and since she was there first, I try to stay out of her way. She looks cold and pitiable. She has a small, trembling face and sad, watery eyes. She begs for sympathy. A music lover who wants a ticket to tonight's symphony.

Some guy comes over and tries to sell me a ticket, but I'm not sure how to tell if it's real. Also he asks for 80. I tell him that's too much for me. He asks me how much I can pay. I shrug. He says, 60. Still too much for me. He leaves. Actually I only have 30 and some change on me

anyway. I just went out to buy some bread, you know. I wonder if this will be enough to buy any ticket.

It's cold and it's dark and it's beautiful outside and I have the strange impression I am in love. A comfortable familiarity pervades the scene. Scalpers stalk the sidewalk in front of me. The shivering red-headed lady holds her "TICKET WANTED" sign to my right. A young man is playing a violin with its case open at his feet to my left. More and more people arrive. Mostly they are old, well-dressed, hobbling and hunched and holding each other through the doors. A man appears with a basket full of pretzels and bread. I'm starving. I woke up at 1pm and I never got my bread.

I buy a butter pretzel. It's expensive and I don't think it's very good. I'm becoming pretty sure I won't get a ticket but I'm hanging out here for ages in the cold anyway. I'm a little furious, offended that my life offers so little else to be interested in. An older man who looks very cultured and neurotic is standing out here too. He is also looking for a ticket, and seems to be ashamed of it. At around 7:30 or 7:40 he caves and he talks to one of the scalpers. They speak in the City's language and I understand enough of their conversation to note with annoyance that the scalper starts out with a much lower price for this guy — 55 or something. The man talks him down to 40, complains and calls the scalper part of the mafia, and buys the ticket anyway.

Actually, I'm pretty sure that the pitiable red-headed woman is in with the scalpers. When no-one else is around, they come over and talk to her out of the corners of their mouths, and she replies, not facing them. So she gets tickets for face value from people who think she's

just some poor girl who wants to see the show tonight, and then she passes the tickets on to scalpers. I see. But still, I grant her first dibs on anyone coming in with a ticket to sell. I don't really care enough to challenge her. An angry old lady rushes towards me, demands something fast and hard-to-follow in the City's language. I stammer out that my vocabulary is not so good and she harrumphs and swoops over to pity-lady. I wonder if she was trying to sell me a ticket.

I feel interestingly resigned. My life, I think, is unhurried. I have no needs and nothing can stress me. I just kind of perambulate about and follow my whims and my curiosity. I take my time. It's okay if I stand out here for an hour and a half and don't get a ticket and then walk on home. No appointment is threatening to be missed, no quota of work is demanding to be filled, there is no deadline to progress towards. I don't mind. Time is strange and forgiving. I think about this distantly and feel comfortably adrift in a large and abstract love for humanity.

The young man on the violin is not very good. I wonder if I should drop some money in his violin case anyway, as a camaraderie thing. We're both inhabiting this momentary little community. This diorama of the narrative, charming and crisp in the early winter. His nervous and shaky notes lend feeling to the atmosphere. Any life at all is better than nothing. A lot of people complain to the pretzel guy that his pretzels are too expensive. To his face! I didn't do that when I bought mine. He's a pretty friendly guy.

I'm sure that I'm in love with someone, which is strange because I don't talk to anyone here and I don't know anyone's name. Everybody in this Land can speak in my language but

they would rather speak in the City's. Fundamentally they could never feel at home with me. This is true of everybody. But I am sure that there is somebody who understands.

A woman appears with a piece of paper. She unfolds it and it reads what I think means "SELLING TICKET" in the City's language.

Pity-lady is there before I am done reading it and I acquiesce. But pity-lady leaves after a short conversation. Maybe she wanted the ticket for cheaper or something. I go over to try my luck. The lady speaks in my language, and she is generous about doing so to simplify to transaction. The babysitter got sick and so the husband had to stay home and watch the kids. 20 is what they paid for it and the seats aren't bad. It's perfect!

I buy the ticket and then go to the pretzel guy to buy another pretzel. He laughs at me. His pretzels are huge. "I am very hungry," I say simply in the City's language. My fingers are too cold to get change out of my pocket. I realize after paying the pretzel guy that I've just given him the last of my coins, so I can't give anything to the bad violin player. I escape the scene quickly by slipping into the Phil.

I am inside, finally, from the cold. Amongst all these fancily dressed old people. Warm sensations of belonging or just warmth fill me. I feel like a wicked ragamuffin. I shower pretzel crumbs on the nice floor as I eat with my gloves still on. It's okay because I have a *ticket*. I *belong* now. I savor my pretzel and these feelings of inclusion. I scan for the charming security

guard. I want to indicate that I successfully got a ticket. I want to share my success with a friend, or at least someone who knows me. He's nowhere to be found. Oh well.

My seat is next to the lady who sold me the ticket, which makes sense, because it was going to be her husband's seat before the babysitter got sick. We talk for a while before the show starts. She confirms my suspicions that pity-lady is part of the scalper screw. She says pity-lady is here every night with the same guys. She sold pity-lady a ticket before, and a different person came in to sit next to her later, crowing about how they bought the ticket for "only" twice the price it should have been. "I didn't have the heart to tell them they were scammed," the lady says sadly. I tell her it's my first time seeing a symphony. I tell her that I don't work when she asks me what I do, that I just kind of walk around as my whims dictate, that I take on no obligations, that I could've just bought a ticket in advance to this show (which I really wanted to see, by the way), but the thought was too distasteful, since it would have bound me to a course of action. It is comforting to speak in my mother tongue, and I am honest and open with the lady who sold me a ticket.

The show lets me down. Maybe it's because I don't know how to appreciate classical music. Maybe my blood sugar is crashing after the two heavy carb items after so long without eating. Maybe I'm tired from the long, fast walk and then the long, cold wait. I am distracted. I keep thinking of errands, e-mails, life purpose, who I am and how I can contribute to society, the bread I still need to buy, etc. I don't talk to anyone and I don't have anything to do. Sometimes people e-mail me but I never answer.

During the intermission the lady who sold me a ticket leaves, but I stay seated and I try to re-focus myself. Don't let your mind wander, I think. Stay present. Pay attention to what is happening. Appreciate this art. There is some love to be found and there is some understanding and I hold on fiercely to that belief. I have formed a bond with the lady who sold me the ticket. I imagine us becoming friends and going to the symphony often together. I make more of an effort to talk to her when she returns. I find out her profession, the ages of her kids, and her opinion on the first half of the show. She liked it. The second half is starting.

I try to stay focused but I'm kind of tired. I try to keep myself from nodding off but I fail and I wish the lady weren't sitting next to me now. I feel embarrassed to be nodding off instead of raptly appreciating the show that she provided me with. This is why it's so important to be alone, I think darkly. When you're alone no-one's opinion matters. Then you are truly free. If I were alone I would just fall right asleep and not give a fuck because I wouldn't be letting any of these people down. I don't want to disappoint the lady. Then I think, maybe I should just not care about this lady and sleep if I want to. Why not. I should just confidently do whatever's best for me, and people will respect that. So I sleep a little.

I wake up though, because the second half of the show is really loud. It's by this composer that I actually really like (which is why I was so determined to see the night's show), and he is very intense. There are drums, and cymbals, and a huge bell, and people are banging on them. I do a little better at staying present. I summarize the symphony in my head as it goes on. I don't feel very comfortable or good though. A wild-haired man is sitting next to me in absolute ecstasy, shaking, eyes closed, composing with his hands and tapping his feet and his vigor makes

me self-conscious and uncomfortable. I won't say I didn't enjoy the show but truth be told I'm kind of relieved when it's over. I am a good sport though. I smile huge and tell the lady the show was amazing. She looks personally proud to hear this. After the long applause we file out and the lady and I are separated by the crowd. I'll probably never see her again but I don't actually care. Her presence was suffocating to be honest.

I feel happy and pleased with myself and empty and weird in turns. I don't feel like leaving the Philharmonic yet. I worked so hard to get in. The architecture is so interesting. I poke around a little. Someone on staff asks me a question in the City's language when I poke too far into a strange room and I excuse myself and slip off. Downstairs a woman has collapsed on the staircase I think she's dying. People are standing all around her. Someone is holding her legs up. I draw in close to try to figure out what is going on. I want to help. I want to understand the situation so I can see what I can do to help. I want to understand myself. But nothing really makes sense to me, and there are already a lot of people here, and I don't really think I'm needed nor do I see what I could do. I don't know how to talk to any of these people. My language sucks. I leave and never think about the lady again.

I walk home v e r y slowly. I walk more slowly to home than I walked quickly from home. So the hour and a half long walk becomes much longer. God I am slow. I am *unhurried*, I think stubbornly. I don't know why I think this stubbornly. I feel childishly angry. I refuse to be hurried by anything. I have no reason to walk quickly, so I won't. I will walk as slowly as I can, and I'll do it gracefully. I'll slink. I'm slinking through the city. I have the occasional misanthropic thought. I am in a very dark mood. Down a wide, empty street, I see a gang of

hooded shadows under distant streetlights. I wonder if they're a bunch of hooligans. I wonder if they'll try to mug me. I think, that would be great. I want them to try to take me. I want to fight. I want to fight someone. I want to struggle and throw some punches and wrestle free and run away. I want to feel my flesh smashing up against someone else's flesh, I want to feel my skeleton impacting someone else's skeleton, I want to be thrown around and pinned down, I want to be moved and excited and violent and struggling to be free. Please. I'm let down again. They're a bunch of young refugees with book bags, chatting chipperly in their mother tongue as they draw near in front of me and pass me by without incident. I'm already free.

I take a few side streets. I don't want to walk down the same paths all the time. I want something new to happen. I don't know what time it is, but I'd guess it's close to 11 by now. I'll probably be home a little after midnight. I can stop by a late-night store on the way home for some more food. A good night. So why do I feel so angry? I want to feel engaged. I'm not engaged. I refuse to walk quickly in the hopes that walking quickly will make me feel engaged (it does a lot of the time). I am all of the time thinking about inner drive and motivation and what I want to do and what the world needs and why I should wake up in the morning. It's so fucking cold. But that's not going to speed me up, no way. I want a proper stroll.

At a busy intersection I stop and consider a late-night store. I'm pretty sure there's a late-night store closer to my house, but I can't remember if that's a late-night store or just a corner store that closes early in the evenings. But I don't want to carry bread any longer than I have to. So I think I'll take my chances. You have to keep your hands empty. Carry as little as you possibly can. Be always ready to walk comfortably for hours – be always ready to run – be

always ready to balance gingerly on the outside of fences along forbidden bridge edges, sidling sidelong step by step above the water – be always ready to climb – be always ready to duck into that interesting looking nightclub –

The door of the late-night store opens and a man, dramatically backlit, unwraps a candy bar, looks me once in the eyes, and then hoofs it down the sidewalk. My God he goes fast. I follow.

This guy has got great sneakers. They're plain, dirty white, but they are just great. And great pants. They're these weird green sweatpants. This guy has *style*. And he's got some sort of purpose. I can't believe I'm having trouble keeping up. I can speed-walk with the best of them, but this guy is just something else. He's multi-tasking too, eating that candy bar with pizzazz while fast-stepping. He tears its wrapper off and dunks it into a trash can we pass by in one long smooth motion without even breaking his stride. I want a candy bar, too. I feel like my footsteps behind him are really loud, and he's going to catch on to the fact that I'm obviously following him, almost running after him. I don't want to scare him.

At a bridge over a canal he jaywalks across the wide street without pausing to look both ways. This I won't do. I'm already on the right side of the street to go home, and the street forks just down the way. But I continue to match his pace, stride for stride, just now we're separated by the wide street. I think he notices me now. A few times I think we look at each other. I almost run into some people coming my way because I'm not looking forward. He stops suddenly in front of a large oak door, knocks on it, stands back. I slow my pace and consider stopping too,

but he's looking in my direction and I don't want to creep him out too much. So I continue walking, suddenly much slower, trying to keep him in my peripherals. The door opens after a bit and someone lets him inside.

Now I stop. I consider the building he's disappeared into. It's a tall white building, vaguely reminiscent of a church, with graffiti on the front of it. I've walked past it enough times on weekends to know it's a music venue. I've never been there, although I've been curious about it since I moved here. There's no name over the door. When I stand still I feel the cold again. I was planning to wake up early tomorrow. But, well, I am a slave to my whims now. In the absence of all other obligations, that's what I've become.

So I stroll across the street, casually, like it was my idea to do so all along. There's a gas station next to the nightclub and I stop to fuel up. This is important, too. Like keeping your hands empty. I get a candy bar and go dancing.

I'm an amazing dancer, you know, seriously. I wish I could show you. People go actually nuts for my dance. A wild-eyed bald man in five-finger shoes is yelling passionately at me in the City's language. Apparently this guy has been telling people that we're married and I'm his wife - a few different people in the club have pointed him out to me and told me so. Now I'm lounging on a couch and he's bent over me, spitting in my face, and I can't understand him at all. I think he's saying something along the lines of "all I want is for you to laugh, all I want is for you to smile, won't you smile for me?" but I'm not sure because he's talking so quickly and he's slurring a bit.

I don't say anything, I don't tell him I can hardly speak his tongue, I just stare back at him stonily and wonder in amazement at how long he can go on and on without me replying at all, without me saying a single word, without me changing my facial expression in the slightest. Minutes on end. It kind of freaks me out that he's being so expressive and he thinks I can understand him and he thinks he is communicating to me but I don't understand and I might as well be deaf or dead and he doesn't know. Having someone yell in your face in a foreign language really turns on the adrenaline. Makes your mind work double-time. I recommend it as a language learning exercise.

Also on the couches later I spent some time next to a boy who was having a really bad reaction to something. He wasn't talking or answering my questions in my mother tongue or in the City's tongue or indicating in any way that he heard them for that matter. He was bent over, occasionally dry heaving. I put my arms around him and hugged him and gave him water and hoped that I was doing the right thing and wished I knew exactly what he had done too much of and what the correct care procedure was and whether or not I should be more concerned and getting him serious help or less concerned and leaving him alone. Mouth slack, eyes rolled back, hair wet with sweat, he lifted his head and gaped at me blankly, and I don't think he saw me at all. He rested his head helplessly on my shoulder and I rested my head helplessly on his. I was let down again by the man with the white sneakers, who turned out to be boring. Besides that, I don't have much to say about the dancing. It was really good. I left at 8:30 AM, as the bakeries opened, and bought myself some fresh bread on the way home.