

Happenstance

A short story by James Hughes

Gabriel Marquez had to work late again. This was becoming his nightly routine. The big boss in the corner office would pass on his paperwork to the manager in the big corner cubicle who then dropped it in Gabe's in-box on the way out.

"Gabe, if you don't mind, I need that on my desk by 9 am tomorrow morning. Have a great night sport!"

There he sat alone, beaten like a rented mule. Gabe looked glumly at his framed MBA hanging in his tiny stuffed cubicle. He knew he was better than this mind numbing, dead-end job. It was infuriating to me that he didn't screw up the courage to tell those sons-o-bitches off. However, I had been watching Gabe for some time now and unfortunately courage was not part of his persona.

Gabriel was clearly a good guy; however, his meek and pensive nature was iconic. I'm not particularly religious, but here he was, named by his optimistic parents after the most audacious of angels. This ironic twist almost made me pity the poor bastard. It's funny, the variance from iconic to ironic is a single letter, yet the variance in their meanings is longer than the Nepali alphabet.

My frivolous musings were interrupted by shoe heels scuffing the sidewalk. Gabe was finally on his way home looking depressed and disheveled as ever. Although he was slightly round, his loose crumbled suit still looked like it belonged to a more imposing figure. He trudged down the dark sidewalk, his portly frame attempting to jump the murky puddles that had accumulated from the incessant rain. This was a typical obstacle in the city. It was also one of

Gabe's principle annoyances. If it rained hard enough, debris clogged the drainage system and pools of filthy water would often linger for weeks. As he grumbled and puddled his way down the street, I settled in the shadows of an alleyway and watched him pass. One hand held his lapels shut, the other clutched the handle of a worn briefcase, heavy with papers. Following him in the evening was much easier than sliding from person to person in daylight. There were so many dark doorways and alleys that a whole army could follow him without being noticed. Of course, it wasn't like he was paying attention anyway. His face was drained, the skin barely motivated to cover his static expression. But one could never be too careful, especially with the risky stunt I was planning this evening.

Glancing down at his watch, he let out a quiet groan and walked a little faster. He came to a crosswalk and stopped to look both ways. Satisfied it was safe to cross, he took a step off the curb. He was immediately met by a car screeching around the corner, its wheels desperately trying to hold traction. I tensed up, expecting the worst. Despite his robust size, Gabe jumped back to the sidewalk just in time. He slipped on the slick pavement and landed ass-first into a filthy puddle. To add insult to injury, the police cruiser in hot pursuit created a tidal wave of grimy water and debris over Gabe's body as it splayed on the sidewalk. I was furious. How can so many people be so inconsiderate? I've got a job to do here! As I turned to give the cop my opinion of his pursuit, the car was already out of sight. I backed into the shadows of the adjacent building. I felt bad for this poor bastard's misfortune. I decided to give him a moment to pull himself together. Anyway, the time was still not right to make my move.

Gabe sputtered for a few seconds and then slowly rose to his feet. He rubbed his eyes and spit onto the sidewalk. He picked up his briefcase and sluggishly turned down his preferred and hazardous shortcut – a darkened alleyway. This guy was the perfect target. He was careless and

distracted. I was glad he had been assigned to me. I picked up the pace and silently veered, following him into the alleyway. This was going to be too easy. I moved from shadow to shadow careful not to give myself away. Gabriel checked his watch again and exhaled even deeper than before. His pace slowed further as he ran a hand through his sopping hair. He was desperately late and that meant a fight was imminent. My stakeouts revealed considerable difficulties with his overbearing girlfriend. Her visits to his small apartment had become more infrequent and she always left in a huff. She was probably waiting at his flat right now ready to serve up a big helping of hot tongue and cold shoulder. His dour expression betrayed his feelings – it was clearly futile to rush.

I didn't notice the pothole until I was practically on top of it. My clumsy attempt to gain control knocked over a few trash cans and startled a feral cat. Gabriel whipped his head around. He stared hard at the fallen trash cans. Fortunately, the feline's panicked departure distracted him long enough to allow me to slip back into the shadows. Thank God my cover hadn't been blown. Looking the cans up and down once more, he shrugged and continued walking down the alleyway. I moved away from the cans and silently continued my pursuit. My years in the business told me the optimal moment was approaching.

Emerging from the alleyway, Gabriel crossed the street into a sea of people. My mind raced. Once he fell into step with the crowd, it would be too late. I backed up a few paces and took a running start.

Ten feet.

Five feet.

Three feet. This had been a long time coming.

I stumbled and shoved him from behind. He lurched forward, tripping over the curb onto the sidewalk. His body finally stopped when it met another. It was woman whom I had also been assigned to recently. She looked as tired as Gabriel, her disheveled business suit stained with the coffee she was carrying. Gabriel straightened up immediately and helped the woman to her feet. His face was smitten and red. I was fortunate he didn't turn back to see who had pushed him.

"I'm so sorry, I just t-tripped on the curb back there and I-" Gabriel stuttered.

She interrupted him with a voice just as nervous. "N-no problem, I should have been looking where I was going."

Gabriel took a handkerchief from his pocket. He gave it to the woman with a shaking hand, his eyes glued to his shoes.

I sighed. "Thank the Lord he had brought it today."

She thanked him in a whisper and attempted to wipe off the stain.

They stood there for a few seconds, both silent.

"Gabriel, don't miss this." I thought.

Gabriel opened his mouth. Even though the street noise was considerable I knew nothing had come out. He needed to say something. Anything.

She sighed a little and stooped to pick up his briefcase. She handed it to him, but he stood there with his mouth agape. I wanted to slap him in the back of the head to make the words come out. But he needed to do this on his own. As she turned to go, Gabriel stood frozen.

I wanted to scream. *"Don't waste the chance again!"*

"D-do you want to go get something to drink?"

The woman turned abruptly. She had a small but hopeful smile on her face. I almost ran over and hugged him.

“Sure, why not?” She answered without any hesitation, her smile widening for a moment before falling a little. “Don’t you have somewhere you have to be right now? It looked like you were in a hurry.”

Gabriel looked down the street, his eyes seeming to look at something in the distance. He stood there for a moment; head tilted slightly. Taking a deep breath through his nose, he exhaled slowly, the world slowing down with him.

“No,” he said. “I honestly don’t.”

His hand no longer shaking, he gestured down the street and they started off. As they turned the corner I could hear her say, “Are you sure that wasn’t just an excuse to talk to me?” Gabriel laughed, the voice coming deep from his heart,

“Maybe I just have a guardian angel looking out for me.”

I sighed, my mind finally at ease. All that hardship had been leading up to this moment. While I was happy I fulfilled my end, I was even more so that Gabriel had fulfilled his. I could go to Michael and tell him it was a job well done. Although it wouldn’t hurt to maybe leave the trash can accident out of the report. It was a sad thought to know that I wouldn’t be following Gabriel around anymore, but I was already excited to see who my next assignment would be. And who knew? Michael always said that people who are close have a way of finding each other again. Besides, the more I thought about Gabriel’s growth, the more it reminded me of another Gabriel I knew very well. And that only made me love my job even more.