

A Short Story

## ...And the Pursuit of Happiness

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he found himself wondering what would happen tonight.*

By J. Ross Macdonald



George Hunter enjoyed riding the subway after the evening crush and rush had abated. Then there was always time for unhurried reading of the Transit ads, and for critical study of the different kinds of people that the subway somehow united if only for the time they all surrendered to its motion. That's a funny idea, he thought; many of these people have never had any individual purpose in life, have blindly surrendered themselves countless times to the flow of life, which, like the subway, carried them through darkness to an unknown destination.

It seemed to him that the subway strangely overemphasized people, stripped them of the distorting factors of daytime existence—an existence in which they were all constantly striving to adapt themselves to the demands of society—in which they strove to appear as they

thought society would wish them to appear. It's as though the subway provided a perfectly blank background against which these people could relax and yet appear in sharp focus. Here, weakness: the drunk asleep in the corner; there, strength of a kind, as characterized



by the fierce primness of the woman across from him, a school teacher or lady's companion, likely unmarried and even more likely militantly resistant to the male power which shaped her life but never touched it. But then, he mused, perhaps she is married. Then the same resentment against men and their works might arise from being the wife of, say, the drunk in the corner.

I give up, he said to himself. These rows of figures are like a pattern in black and white; they're like writing, but in a difficult language. Close analysis is useless; all one can read is "life."

George didn't mind the subway. Even crowded and rank with the smell of close-packed bodies, it held a fascination for him. His thoughts turned with mingled condescension and scorn to his richer friends who boasted of never using the subway after the first trial run. Sure, he thought, it's often dirty, smelly, and these people aren't among the Four Hundred, but this is life. Here one can see the raw element of history—the common people. Time spent on study of the common people would be better than time expended in search of the right bath salts or the perfect pair of gloves. But, he concluded, it would be useless to tell them that. Nevertheless, he felt his gaze straying upward to the ads—useless information sold for the price of attention.

How much better to present a course in art or music in the same space, changing the lessons each week. No, that would be too easy; even the few who would read them wouldn't benefit. A thing needs to be difficult of attainment to be properly valued. He looked at a picture of a glamorous young girl, "Miss Weekly New York." ... "This beautiful young miss likes dancing, figure skating, and modeling. Her grand passion in food is cooking cauliflower." Cooking cauliflower, for heaven's sake....

Coming up to the street he began to think about Jeanne, the girl he was calling on tonight. She was peculiar, yet he liked her. Why can't I analyze why I like her, why she seems so peculiar?

The sky was dimly lit with the diminished light of summer stars seen from a city street. A well—this city is a well; these buildings pointing upwards are its sides. I am at the bottom and can't escape out of it to freedom, to light, to air.

The sight of the stars reminded him of a dream of Jeanne's that she'd once told him about. She dreamed she'd awakened in the middle of the night while staying in the country, and restless, had come out upon the balcony to watch the night. It had not seemed strange to her that there were no stars in the sky, but that instead she saw them, motionless, burning brightly, strewn out on the meadow before her window like balls of fire. The sight had not seemed unusual to her, yet she'd felt sad and somehow responsible that this thing should be. And so she had gone out into the meadow, gathered the stars, and managed to put them all back in place in the firmament again. Awakening the next morning, she'd felt worn out with the labor of replacing

them, but she hadn't felt really frightened until she noticed that during the night, all of the furniture had been moved around in such a way as to alter completely the character of the room.

"Nerves," George had said when she had finished telling him her dream. "You've simply been working too hard at your damn publishing house. You ought to take time off and analyze your position. You're twenty-six, have an excellent job, and are slowly working yourself out of health and happiness through your iron determination to prove yourself a success. And this same determination is leading you to destroy your chances of the happy married life which you've told me is your ultimate goal."

"I'm not against working women," he'd said, "but you are developing a professional hardness, a managing air which naturally tends to irritate the men you meet who would like you, yet would resent being managed. I think your dream, your rootlessness, is caused by the conflict between your subconscious awareness of your basic desires, and your conscious refusal to believe that you are acting foolishly."



As George came nearer and nearer her apartment, he found himself wondering what would happen tonight. He'd known her quite a long time. They'd never been physically intimate, yet had always spoken to each other with complete frankness. He remembered wonderingly, however, the small hasty kisses she'd given him unsolicited, on the several occasions that she had come to the station to see him off on one of his trips. It didn't quite make sense. It had been a long time since he'd last seen Jeanne, he mused. It had been getting harder and harder to tolerate her efforts to dominate him; that was more man's place than woman's, he felt. Arriving, he could see through the half-open window that she was working, probably on some proofs she had brought home from the office. She broke off at the sound of the doorbell and came to the door to meet him. He thought that she looked nice tonight—tired, but with the look of one who has fought for a long time against some unknown oppression and has now vanquished it.

He came in then with the hope that this time she would be different—not fighting against life, but, self-aware, going with it. Jeanne fixed drinks; they sat and talked of common interests in art, literature, music, while the radio played Brahms's Second, obbligato. She is nice, thought George. Our tastes and sensibilities agree to a startling degree. It would all seem so peaceful and right to an outsider listening in, but for him, at least, it wasn't right. He could feel her subtly beginning to dominate the conversation, to regulate the period of the conversation's ebb and flow. It was the same old thing. Here we go again; she hasn't changed, he heard himself thinking. Even though she knows her faults—we've discussed that subject often—she won't be able to cure herself

unless she can find some overpowering interest outside her work, outside herself. Perhaps a love affair....yes, a love affair would do her good...but then she'd feel impelled to dominate and no good could come of it...no, that wouldn't work...

Yes, tonight had unquestionably been just like all their other dates, he told himself as he stood up to go, but this time I'll make up for her domination—for allowing myself to be led—by really kissing her goodnight. He did not stop to think that it might be childish to require reparation for behavior which he himself had allowed—another man might have resisted her—but pulled her impetuously to him, and kissed her.

He began it as a brutal, demanding kiss, but changed its character to tender when he felt her begin to quiver all over. It came to him as a surprise that for once she wasn't trying to dominate him. Then he stopped thinking and surrendered himself to feeling.

It was all too easy, too surprisingly simple. He got up and began putting on his clothes. He hadn't meant this to happen, hadn't planned it, yet it had happened and now was over. He remembered how her passion had turned to passivity when she was confronted with the final decision. Still, he had had his way.

He began to imagine what different writers would have made of the situation: one, dirty; another, satirical and humorous; a third, mystical. It had been none of these. Then he remembered the faces on the subway. He had seen that even the most varied types are still only types. It is the individual, abstracted from the mass, who is really important. On his

way to his date with Jeanne he had succeeded in identifying many of the major divisions of the masses in the car he sat in: the drunk who escapes the mores of civilization for a time by losing himself; the woman, who, resenting the rules of society, its conventional morality, must needs conform for the lack of alternative—these, and the greater mass from which they have sprung, those who are vaguely unhappy, yet have not consciously realized that there is a powerful, underlying structure to society which regulates their activities. Yet he had finally given up, in a way; he had had to admit that "all one can read is life."

Jeanne had evidently been new to it, and he had been much disconcerted by her shift from passion to passivity. Yet it had been a simple act and he had not thought of dominating or being dominated after the first shock of the kiss. Somehow the whole question no longer seemed as important as it had in the beginning.

They spoke little afterwards, and as soon as he was dressed, he left, but he couldn't help trying to picture what she was thinking. Her last words had been strange: "Blot out the stars; leave me alone in the darkness. When it's dark, I can't see myself running."

*"Over-dramatic," snapped George Hunter, as he pulled the last of the pages from the typewriter and placed it with its fellows. No one would have such complicated thoughts, would analyze situations and himself so mercilessly. He balled the sheets together and threw them savagely into the wastebasket. His gaze shifted, involuntarily. He looked out his window to make sure that the stars were where they belonged. They were. He lit a cigarette.*