

An Insignificant Occurrence

By ReadWorks

Something must be going on, Manuel thought as he stood on the corner between two streets whose names he couldn't pronounce. He kicked at the packed snow underfoot with the toe of his boot. He cupped his hands to his mouth and blew on his stiffened fingers and then shoved his hands back into the pockets of his wool coat. He watched the young people stream past him, headed westbound toward a sun that was setting blood-red between strange skyscrapers and giant flashing billboards for products Manuel couldn't understand the purpose of.

He felt at the money in his pocket. They didn't use coins here. He supposed it represented an advancement of civilization. After all, every country gradually drops its measliest coins when those coins become a burden. To have no coins at all must be ahead of the curve. But Manuel missed the weight in his pocket, the jangle as he walked, and the feel of cold metal between his fingers. The few bills he had were of various sizes and colors, with very high numbers on them, so that he had to stop and calculate even the simplest purchase—a pack of gum in a flavor not available at home, for example, or a bus ticket.

Undiminished in their numbers, the young people continued to pass, looking not at all bothered by the cold. Most traveled in groups of three, four, or five; but even these small groups seemed to Manuel only parts of the larger group, like gears in a vast human clock. The thought gave Manuel pause. He checked his watch. His friend should have arrived half an hour ago.

Manuel's friend had never been late before. She had always been on time, even early on occasion. Had something happened to her? The city could be dangerous; this Manuel knew firsthand. He himself had already encountered numerous stealthy and unforgiving dangers. The incident with the fruit, for example. How was he to know that the particular grocery into which he wandered, small and unassuming as it appeared, specialized in rare and even dangerous fruits? (Some of which were poisonous if not prepared properly.) He couldn't read the language! Later the symbol for DANGER was pointed out to him, but it was different from the evil-looking skull used back home. How was he to know?

And the traffic? Downright lethal. How many times had Manuel looked both ways twice, sprinted off the curb, and *still* narrowly missed collision with a taxi or double-decker bus or police car? He imagined his friend struck down in the street, onlookers circled around her, their concern mild and distant. He shuddered and banished the thought.

But—Manuel gave himself such a shock he nearly jumped—what if *he* was at fault? Was he at the wrong meeting place? Might his friend, at this very moment, be standing on some desolate street corner halfway across the city, checking her watch and imagining him sprawled dead in the alien street? He pulled out his cell phone. No missed messages. He texted her. He called her.

Fifteen minutes later he had received no word. The young people passed him like a river around a rock, like wind around a lamppost, unending, indifferent. They spoke in hushed, excited tones. They held on to the arms of their companions, huddled together not for warmth, but as though sharing a delicious secret. Who were they, this migrating generation? Where were they headed? Where did they come from? What knowledge was theirs that Manuel would never know?

After 15 more minutes, he gave up. He did one last slow 360 turn, scanning in all directions for a sign of his friend, and then, hardly aware of having made a decision, he began to move with the young people, westward. The sun had not yet dipped below the horizon. It smoldered like a coal, glowing red, disappearing behind a sign and then showing itself again as Manuel flowed onward with the young people who did not question or greet him. They paid him no attention at all. With Manuel among them, they passed clothing stores, groceries, Laundromats, restaurants, bars, and flowed on into the next neighborhood with its indistinguishable clothing stores, groceries, Laundromats, restaurants, bars.

It seemed to Manuel as though the young people took his presence for a given: *Of course you are here*, they seemed to say. Where else could you go?

They walked for a long time. It must have been hours, but Manuel never once checked his phone, so he couldn't be sure. The young people seemed not to tire. If anything, they appeared more energized than ever. *Yes*, he thought, *their conversations have grown more urgent, their gestures more emphatic. Maybe we're approaching our destination. Then again*, he reasoned, *a weary mind will play tricks*. He was getting quite hungry, having had no lunch, and slush had found a crack in one of his boots, leaving his foot sopping wet. But the young people remained clinging to one another as though solitude was impossible to bear, and Manuel in his turn found it impossible to leave them.

They crossed an eight-lane expressway between huge concrete pillars supporting a major byway overhead, emerging from the overpass's shadow. And then he saw her, his friend, a face in a stream of faces that approached from the left to merge seamlessly with the stream in which Manuel himself was swept along. He tried to get her attention by shouting her name and waving his arms, but his voice sank before it could reach her.

Nevertheless, he struggled his way toward her, and finally made it. He tapped on her shoulder. "Oh, Manuel," she said without slowing her pace, "hello." Manuel looked her over. She seemed changed. "What happened?" he asked. "We were supposed to meet hours ago." She thought for a moment, as though he referred to a past measured not in hours, but years. Finally she raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth slightly. "Oh, that's right," she said. "I forgot."

The lights of the city overpowered the stars. Only clouds or smoke or smog showed against the night. She drifted away from him, and Manuel let himself be carried on by a current of bodies, his thoughts adrift on a current of thoughts. He was no longer cold. He was no longer hungry.