Jump
by Sue Lange
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Wendt checked her forward motion just enough to register the scene across the street: the crowd at the base of 9 W 23rd shouting encouragement; the two cops entering the ground floor, heading for the roof to prevent the loser/poseur/wannabe from making the 6:00 p.m. edition; said loser looking down in trepidation, wondering what the hell he or she had been thinking.

“Yeah, what are you thinking?” Wendt said aloud to herself. Then in her head she muttered: If you’re serious, you need a tad more privacy than 9 W 23rd.

Somewhere above her in the upper floors of 12 W 23rd, a child cried.

The train rumbled below the grating, pushing hot, fetid tunnel air up and out into the open. It rushed up at Wendt, oddly giving her relief from the hot, fetid city air surrounding her and the jump crowd. She sprinted down the entrance steps to the turnstile. After depositing her token, she rushed into the car just as the canned voice ordered “Stand clear the closing doors.”

Sweaty and panting, she nabbed the vacant seat next to the woman in a white uniform knitting something
babyish in a soft pink and periwinkle color scheme. The knitter was annoyed that she had to move the ball of yarn from Wendt’s intended seat, making a big show of finding a home for it on her lap with all her other things. Wendt nodded a silent thanks. The conversation ended.

As the train headed through Chelsea and Downtown, it filled up a little more at each stop. By the time they hit Borough Hall, it groaned at capacity with the tired day workers crammed in like refugees in a banana boat. The poor slobs standing tried to keep their dignity and distance, but they wound up touching each other anyway.

The two standing in front of Wendt commented on a newspaper headline some guy had the audacity to open wide enough for everyone to see. The article reported the latest rash of suicides, asking “What Is Going On?” in Geobold typeface. It wondered what had taken over the minds of the city’s inhabitants.

“It’s too many people,” the greasy red-pantsed man hovering over Wendt said.

“No, it’s too hot,” his partner, half his height, said.

“I believe something’s helping them along,” a woman in a red business suit offered, just on the outskirts of their personal space.

“Like something supernatural?” the first man said.

“They say,” that from a workman in a crud-encrusted Carhart jacket.

“I don’t believe that stuff,” the little woman who
was the partner of the red-pantsed man said.

“You don’t need to believe it,” said someone outside the immediate group altogether. Everyone turned toward the speaker.

Down in her seat, Wendt could see nobody. She craned around, trying to spot the name of the stop they were at to determine how much further she had to go to the Hook. The entire car was now discussing the contents of the newspaper. The air conditioning had a long way to go to keep up and Wendt was beginning to feel stifled. She pulled at her collar.

Finally, her stop, and she pushed her way through the philosophical crowd. As the doors started to close, she ejected herself. The crowd should have applauded the admirable feat but it remained silent. The car rumbled away.

She walked up the steps into the shimmery air of the Gardens, where brownstones decked with beautiful front yards proudly displayed the latest in horticultural cuisine: gladiolus, day lily, shocking yellow poppy, and crimson rose climbing above it all. At the end of Columbia Street, on the other side of the five-story, old brick high school, was a slope that led to a marshy area. If you kept to the side and followed the path of litter, you’d find your way to the hole in the prefab cement wall that separated the Gardens from the bypass. When you got down to the shoulder of the highway, you could easily pick your way through the ten lanes of cars driving a minimum of twenty miles
over the speed limit. Wendt always did it with her eyes closed, running like hell and hoping for the best.

Once on the other side of the highway, she followed the wall to the hole that led to the Hook proper. It opened onto the dead end of North Lane, which served as the back alley for a row of three story apartments, home to aging residents that never got the memo about a bypass coming to town twenty years ago. They stubbornly refused to move to a more civilized section and lived on pensions and the daily visit by Meals on Wheels.

Wendt traveled past the old folks and on through the projects, the ten-story cement blocks reminiscent of gulags or other buildings constructed to house hundreds of inhabitants deemed unworthy of living in a building with siding or a façade. The lawns in the projects were mere dirt. Sleeping residents filled the park benches plopped here and there in the yard to give the place a homey-in-an-urban-kind-of-way feel.

She nodded to familiars. Some of the people here knew her, not intimately, but as a passerby, somebody who didn’t live here, but for some reason frequented the sidewalk. Neither crack dealer nor buyer, she didn’t have an obvious purpose. But there she was, passing through to the old warehouses at the end of the lane.

The sun would set in an hour or so, but the city heat was relentless and the Hook’s ubiquitous black pavement egged it on.
Wendt headed toward the warehouses at the end of the old pier where she could sit and cool off. The row of tall buildings provided a canyon for the wind coming off the water. It funneled the moving air through the yard, dropping the temperature five degrees.

North Lane ended at the old gate that had served as the entrance to the yard. It stood now half-on, half-off its hinges. She stooped to enter and turned sharply left toward her favorite resting bench — a seat torn from a ’55 T-Bird — a leftover from a previous rape and pillage of the property of some poor classic car lover. This last remnant of a finer age in automobile history had had its stuffing torn out in places, no doubt by the children of the projects who, in a creative mood one day, had used the stuffing to decorate the ground as well as the chain link fence the bench leaned against.

She turned now to her favorite resting bench, contemplating an evening of contemplation, but stopped abruptly. A lone stranger, head in hands, sat on her bench.

“Mind if I join you?” Wendt asked the stranger, hoping the cliché wouldn’t be too offensive.

The young man jerked and looked up but seemed unable to focus. He was sickly thin with mottled skin and eyes that went every which way. He didn’t answer.

A bottle of Jack-Black — the cheap stuff — stood half empty in front of him. Judging from his
nervousness, Wendt knew he couldn’t have been here long; the Jack hadn’t quite sunk in yet.

“Come here often?” she said, as if this was a bar and he was a pick-up.

He said nothing, just looked at the ground.

Despite the fading light, she could discern the struggle. He blinked, he tried to focus, to fathom what she was doing here at just this time. He didn’t want her here. Did not need her. Had too many problems right now.

He reached for the bottle.

“Spare a sip?” she asked.

He looked up now, all struggle gone. Now he was clearly annoyed and wondering why.

“I got no money,” she said.

“This is all I have,” he said, faltering painfully, like it hurt to say it. He lifted the bottle and took a pull. As he did so something rattled in his free hand.

“Hm,” she said. “More’n me.”

He swallowed, grimaced, coughed, wiped his mouth with the short sleeve of his T-shirt. The move forced the bottle in Wendt’s direction. She stared at it and then at him. Finally out of guilt he passed it over.

She took an easy swig and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, then handed the bottle back.

Silence. Then:

“You doing it with Percodan?” she asked.

“What?”

“Percodan. Percocet. Tell me you’re not doing it
with aspirin!” she said.

“Aspirin?” he asked.

“You don’t seem like the aspirin type,” she said.

“I’m...” He hesitated. “...not.”

“Of course you are,” she said. “Why else are you here? How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Twenty-nine, same as me. How about that? Twenty-nine and nothing to live for. Isn’t that a bit dramatic?”

“Dramatic?”

“Over the top, my friend. You’re too young to die.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“Well, that’s good, because I could’ve sworn I heard a little bottle of Percodan jiggling around somewhere.”

“I have no intention of...”

“Okay, okay, we’re doing the denial bit, but I can’t give you help if you don’t want it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Sure you do, I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t at least need it.”

“Need what?”

“Help.”

“From you?”

“Why not from me?”

“You can’t even afford a bottle of this.” He held up the Jack-Black. “You’re worse off than me.”

“No shit, and you oughta share with those less fortunate than yourself.”
“I don’t even want it,” he said. “Take it, it’s yours. I don’t need it.”

He handed the bottle over.

“Wow,” she said, reaching for the bottle. “You’re going it alone, eh?”

“I don’t need that shit.”

“So you admit it.”

“Why the fuck shouldn’t I? What’s it to you?”

“Nothing, now that I got the bottle.”

“So go off and drink it, loser.”

“This is my seat.”

“It’s not your seat. It’s not anyone’s seat.”

“In that case, it’s not your seat and you can’t tell me to leave. I’m staying ’til the sun goes down.”

“Why, so you’ll witness it?”

“What?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t know. Oh, you mean the thing with the Percodan?”

“It’s not Percodan.”

“Can I ask you why?”

“It’s none of your business. And the answer is I’ve got nothing to live for.”

“How cliché. And that’s never the reason, anyway. Something happened. You screwed up and now you can’t go home.”

“Fuck off.”

“I knew it.” She smiled and took another drink. She swallowed and wiped her mouth. “I think you should
just go home and apologize. What is it with you, you’ve never made a mistake in your life? Can’t face a failure?”

“I’m not talking any more. And if you don’t leave, I will.”

Wendt said nothing. It was a difficult situation. Tricky at this point. He could go either way. This was no rooftop self-offer. He was serious and had the Percodan to prove it.

“Uh,” she said, avoiding both mollycoddle and cajole. The wrong move could set the mood cockeyed and she’d never get him out of here. The sooner he left, the sooner she could enjoy the remainder of the evening.

“You can’t know,” he finally blurted out.

“I know I can’t know,” she said and then stopped herself from committing to something big.

“No one can possibly know.”

“No one,” she said.

“No one can know how hard it is.” His words tripped, slipped a bit. She said nothing.

“You work, and work, and work,” he said and stopped, pinching his lips to hold back the words that weren’t there anyway. His hands clenched together into fists pressed against his thighs.

He took a deep breath.

“And nobody sees it until the one time...”

He hung his head and shook it back and forth. A staccato intake of breath and his shoulders started
shaking.

“They boil you in oil,” he whispered mostly to the ground. He abruptly turned to her and shouted, “And then they hang you out to dry!”

He jumped up and turned to the chain link fence behind the bench seat. He clenched it, his left hand palming the bottle of pills. He shook the fence, releasing rage with each shake and wail: “Hang you! Hang you! Hang you!”

Wendt watched.

He turned back to her, his eyes wide. He rushed to her and knelt, grabbing her hands in his. “Why? Why? Why?” he pleaded.

“Because they can,” she answered, vacantly.

“But why would they?” He let go of her hands and sat on the ground with his back to the car seat. “I wouldn’t,” he moaned. “If it was up to me.”

“You wouldn’t?” she asked.

“No.” He turned his face towards her. “Would you?”

“I hope not,” she said.

“Me too,” he answered.

“Did you get sacked?” she asked.

“It’s none of your damn business,” he said. Then he rose up and shouted. “None of your god-damned business!”

“No, it’s not, you’re right. I’m sorry.” She thought she had him, but now it was going backwards.

“Fuck you and you’re sorry. Where’s that fucking
bottle?”
“Right here,” she said, lifting it to her lips.
“Gimme that,” he said, snatching it from her.
“Ow!” she yelled, grabbing her mouth. “My tooth.”
“What?”
She pinched her front tooth between her thumb and forefinger, searching for damage. “You hit my tooth.”
“Oh, I’m sorry,” the young man said. “I didn’t mean to, I just wanted a drink. I’m sorry; I just wanted...”
“It’s all right, it’s all right. You’ve a right to be angry. You’re struggling here. You’ve lost everything. I understand.”
“I didn’t lose everything. I’ve got more’n you.”
“Well, everyone’s got more’n me,” she said. “But you’ve lost everything.”
“No, I haven’t. Just my job, and my...”
“Even if you have no job and your wife leaves you, you still have your life. And things will get better.”
“Oh, how cliché. Tell me how you know that.”
“I don’t know it so much, but I do know that things can’t possibly get worse for you.”
He stood staring at her. The sun was almost down now and she couldn’t tell if he thought she was making a joke at his expense or not. Crucial point in the repartee.
“Not funny,” he finally, quietly said. Then, raising his voice, “Not fucking funny.” He threw the bottle at the pavement in front of the warehouse loading dock. It exploded and the contents spilled. “Are you joking?”
“No,” she said.
“Not fucking funny,” he said, quieter again.
“I have something to show you,” she said. She hadn’t wanted to share this with anybody, but the guy just wasn’t getting off the pot. He’d passed through denial and anger and had stalled at acceptance. He needed to shit or get off the pot.
“C’mon.” She grabbed his elbow and turned him towards the Pickle Factory, the large warehouse on the far end. It was so named not so much for any dill or bread & butter canning activities, but for its more recent status as a repository for guests of the local hit squad. Cops were not fond of following up on mysterious midnight tips called in the middle of the night regarding 55 gallon drums found on the ground floor of the Pickle Factory. They never knew what head, torso, or complete corpse with its eyes gouged out they’d find upon opening it.
She led the young man around back to a first floor window broken out years ago by the same sensitive youths who had had their way with the T-bird seat.
She climbed through the window, calling to him to follow. Inside, the odor of vinegar and brine recalled the Factory’s former days of hum and clack.
“Stinks in here,” the young man said as he stepped through the hole in the wall.
“Not so bad,” she answered. “When you get used to it.”
They felt their way along the back wall until the
light from the south end’s bank of cracked and missing windows allowed the newly wakened street lights in. They found the back stair case. Stumbling up six flights of echoey steps with dead rodents and other debris crunching under their feet, they came to another broken window that allowed in fresh air and a bit of dim light.

“This way,” Wendt climbed onto a fire escape that had rusted into a position extending straight up to the roof. She climbed the creaky piece, then turned back to peer over the edge as the young man tentatively followed.

“This is nuts,” he muttered.
“Yeah,” she said.

Upon obtaining the roof, he stopped for a moment to take in the just-emerging starry night. The rushing sound of the city provided a lonely backdrop, reminding Wendt of how small and vulnerable people are when cut off from humanity.

“Over here,” Wendt called. When he reached her, she pointed to the local neighborhood down below. The cracked sidewalk was vacant and a single streetlight cast a murky glow to the empty dockyard and boarded-up warehouses. The T-bird seat with its disgorged stuffing was barely visible on the edge of the light’s capabilities.

“Yeah, so,” the young man said, keeping back from the edge.

“Look around you,” she said. “The clocktower, the
Watchtower, the Heights, the river, the City.”

“Beautiful,” he said. “But I’m not getting the point.”

“Look at all the thousands of lives,” she said. “If you could remove the roofs and walls of all those apartment and office buildings, we’d see a doll’s house of seven million lives and their tragedies.”

“ Weird,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“No, you’re weird.”

“I imagine how much depravity is going on right now,” she continued. “How many rapes, tortures, child abuses: the scalding, whipping, carving with knives.”

“That’s horrible!” he said.

“We only read about it,” she said. “Out there.” She swept the City with her outstretched hand. “Out there, they all live it. Right now, how many children in those invisible homes are having their hands stuck in pots of boiling water for the audacity of not wanting to eat their peas?”

“Why did we come up here?” he asked.

“To let you know you have a choice,” she said. “You aren’t one of those children being loved and hated at the same time. You can end it all easily. It’s quicker from up here than Percodan. No more hand scalding.”

“It’s not hand scalding,” he said. “I’m not a child. It’s only shame.”

“Only shame?” She lifted her arm to him as if to offer a handshake. He stepped back.

“Adult pain is mental,” she said. “And so much
more acute, wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” he answered quickly, stepping back again. “We can get over it, they....”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I think it stays and festers. Why are you here? Why the Percodan?” She stepped next to him, raised her hands to his shoulders, offering help if he needed it.

He pushed her backwards and said. “I’m not here.”

He ran to the fire escape. Just as he reached it, he turned and threw the Percodan vial. It hit the roof with a final rattle. And then he escaped down the escape.

She heard him fumbling on the stairs inside the factory, crunching the bones and glass. Soon he was out in the yard, moving through the pale light like a ghost. He climbed over the chain link fence and out into the darkness, his clattering footsteps getting softer and softer until they were out of her hearing.

She picked up the pills and stood close to the edge of the roof to read the prescription, which wasn’t there because they were only aspirin.

Shoulda known, she thought.

She dropped the bottle and looked out over the city. She imagined the roofs removed from all the apartment office buildings. She saw the pain in all the rooms of all the homes in all the buildings. It registered for a moment and then she jumped over the edge.
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