

## **“You Must Not Fall. You Must Remain Safe.” By P.J. Kaiser**

Bodies pressed against Gerald as he gripped his cane in one hand and the subway pole in the other. The throng swayed in unison as the brakes began to slow down the F train and it slid into the 23rd Street stop. People moved toward the exits and Gerald heard a crackling sound over the loudspeaker. “You must not fall. You must remain safe,” said an authoritative male voice. Gerald looked up in confusion as if to find the source of the voice - what a strange thing for the driver to say. Then it came again, “You must not fall. You must remain safe.”

Gerald looked around and saw that none of the young professionals hustling around him seemed to take any notice of the voice. Shuffling to the edge of the train, Gerald held onto the door, planted his cane on the platform and his foot dangled for a moment before landing next to his cane. The voice from the speaker echoed in his head as he walked. He wondered if they had him in mind when they made that announcement. Gripping the railing, he ascended the stairs to street level.

He paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the sunlight. In spite of his failing eyesight, he had no difficulty finding his way because he knew every inch of the route from his apartment in Queens to the Andrew Heiskell Library in Manhattan. He walked close to the buildings, but allowed plenty of clearance for people entering and leaving the businesses that lined the Avenue of the Americas. He checked his watch: 9:40am. Right on time. It would take him about twenty minutes to cover the three and a half blocks to the library. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday he stood waiting outside the entrance when they unlocked the door at 10:00am to provide him access once again to his lifelong passion: reading. The “talking book library” made it possible.

He turned from 6th Avenue onto 20th Street and as he rounded the corner, a jogger side-swiped him, knocking into his shoulder. Gerald reeled and landed against the side of a building. He leaned heavily against the rough cement and panted. Looking over his shoulder, the jogger was nowhere to be found. The voice from the train reverberated in his ears once

again: "You must not fall. You must remain safe." Just once instead of warning him not to fall, he wished somebody would be there to help him up again. He knew this journey involved risk, but it was worth it. He couldn't afford to buy audio books and couldn't afford to live closer to the library. His pension pegged to his year of retirement - twenty years ago - and it purchased less each year.

Gerald stood alone outside the library door and within seconds after he arrived, the guard unlocked the door. The guard smiled and swung the door open wide, "Hello, Mr. Mersino."

"Good morning, Anthony. Gorgeous day out, isn't it?" Gerald made his way inside and blinked against the relative darkness.

"Spectacular, sir. Have a good read."

"Thanks, Anthony. Take care."

Gerald checked in at the front desk and picked up his selection for the day. He walked to the listening center, settled into an available station and inserted the cassette for "Alamut" by Vladimir Bartol. As the reader's voice streamed into his headphones, Gerald looked around. More stations were occupied than usual. Three of the people he could see were blind. A woman - perhaps around his age - sat at the station diagonal from his. He could tell that she had the same vision problems that he did by the thick silver-framed glasses perched on her nose. She spied him looking at her and gave him a little smile. As the morning went by, they occasionally exchanged glances and smiles. Eventually, he couldn't resist the impulse to glance at her left hand. He smiled at the presence of an engagement ring, minus the wedding band. Probably a widow.

He normally stayed at the library until 12:30 and then left to get lunch. However, when the woman with the silver glasses began gathering her things to go at 12:00, he decided to break with tradition and try to meet her. As he stood up, his toe caught the edge of the chair leg and he tripped. Sprawled out on the carpet, he tried to push himself up to find his glasses which had been dislodged in the fall.

“Are you all right?” said a soft voice. Gerald’s hand landed on his glasses. He pushed them on and looked up to see the woman with the silver glasses leaning and offering a hand to pull him up.

“Yes, in spite of a warning this morning to be careful, I’ve been very accident-prone today.” With some effort, the woman braced herself and pulled and Gerald pushed off from the floor and a chair and eventually Gerald stood.

“Thanks so much for your help. I’m Gerald.”

“I’m Gertrude. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank heavens for soft carpeting!” They both chuckled. “Would you like to join me for lunch?”

“Why, yes! I’d be delighted!”

Gerald and Gertrude shuffled their way back to the front desk and then out into the sunshine.

*Special thanks to NYC Stories for the tweet about an actual subway announcement that inspired this story.*

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