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Her Private Serenade

His cheerful whistling floated through her window, and captured her heart. If he only knew.



Paul Degen/The New York Times

by JOHANNA BALDWIN
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IT'S possible I had seen him before, but not until Christmas Day did I actually notice him. That's the day he became part of my life. Normally I would have been with my family. This season was different. Not only had I run out of money, lost someone I cared about and needed to be alone, I also wanted to stay home and write. That's what I was doing the morning of Dec. 25 in the top-floor apartment of the brownstone on West 11th Street when I heard him for the first time.

His music was coming from the east. It was a clear sound, joyous. It was a Christmas carol, although I can't remember which one. From the windowsill, I couldn't see much, even with my face pressed against the glass. The only thing I could see was his footprints. It had snowed all night, and the snow was still falling. I could hear a whistling sound moving past my building, but all I could see was the image of a man who was wearing a hooded parka and walking his dog.

Although the whistler and I never met, we spent the entire holiday season together. Nearly every day, he walked down my street whistling a different melody, mostly show tunes. He was the unexpected, unwrapped holiday gift. Anytime I heard him, I moved to my window to get a glimpse. The priority, of course, was to listen, until the sound faded and then turned a corner.

The first person I told about the whistler was my landlord, an attractive, gigantic bald man who, like me, also stayed in the city for the New Year. He seemed genuinely moved, as if he wished this had been his experience rather than mine. I realized that I had stumbled onto something unique. I had an enviable relationship with someone I didn't know. And in fact, I may not be the only New Yorker with a whistler; one was sighted in TriBeCa last winter.

I wanted to tell my two friends in the building but needed to wait until they were back from their holiday celebrations. They returned in mid-January, and then I waited until the whistler was approaching so they could be drawn in as I had been. When the opportunity came, I rushed downstairs to share the news. The two of them were on separate telephone lines the moment the whistler reached the front of the building. Overly excited, I told them everything I knew about the whistler, which was very little. At the same time, I pointed out the window, suggesting they hurry so that they wouldn't miss him. They looked at me with utter boredom, and continued their phone conversations. Then one of them yawned.

On one of the coldest February nights of record, I was having dinner on Perry Street with an Australian cinematographer and a producer friend when I heard him again. I told the women to listen, then began to tell them all about the whistler and his dog. Again, I didn't know what to say, except that the whistler lifts my spirits whether I'm working or not working, whether I'm having a good or bad day, whether our country is bombing another country or whether anyone has killed one of our soldiers recently.

The women went to the window, blocking my view, and their eyes brightened as they described the whistler back to me. Good-looking. Handsome, even. Why is he alone on a Saturday night? They suggested I introduce myself. That didn't make sense. The whistler they were describing didn't sound like my whistler at all. I elbowed my way to the window to see for myself. And then I realized it. They were looking at the wrong man with the wrong dog. The man they were looking at wasn't even whistling. The real whistler, who is an older gentleman, had just disappeared off West Fourth Street.

The women suggested that I might be fixated on older men. Then the producer handed me a bag of leftovers and sent me home.

It's not a latent adolescent crush, I later explained to a friend on the phone. He's somewhere between his late 40's and early 60's. His sandy hair is thinning, but still looks good. He wears darkish glasses and dresses more formally than casually. He sometimes wears a bow tie, but on the one and only warm day of spring, he wore a T-shirt. I knew he wouldn't be wearing a T-shirt this spring day because there was a snowstorm outside. I figured I wouldn't even see him because of the ice coming down.

We continued talking on the phone, and somewhere between the subjects of money and men, we both heard him. The whistler was outside in the storm. I opened the window and stuck the phone outside so that as he whistled down the

street, my friend and I could both hear him. She laughed, and I knew she understood what I did, that the whistler was the neighborhood alchemist who could transform an ordinary something into the extraordinary without knowing it.

Eventually it really did become spring. The whistler started wearing T-shirts, his steps seemed to be lighter, even his whistling was impossibly more upbeat. "Almost Like Being in Love" was his song of the day. If the whistler was happy about spring, I would try to be the same.

HAVING a relationship with someone you don't know is never disappointing. He will never say he is going to call you and then not call. He will never promise to do something for you and not do it. He will never say he is going to show up and then keep you waiting, or, worse, not show up at all. He will never ask you to do something you can't do. He will never let you down. He will never say the wrong thing.

The weeks of rain and thunderstorms did their best to stand in the way of summer's arriving. I'm not sure what confuses me more: relationships with people I actually do know or New York weather. Whatever the answer, the sun fought through the rain and finally won. We all knew we would see the sun again; we just didn't know when we would see it or how long it would last. Just as I'm pretty sure I'll see the whistler again. I just never know when.

Inevitably the day will come when I won't see him anymore. It won't be a dramatic day filled with emotion. There will be no letter or phone call, no flowers. There will be no abandoner and no abandonee. There will be no tears or blame, and the experience won't be entangled with frustration or hope. It will be as natural as the changing seasons, just like the day when a person looks back and realizes it's not winter anymore.

Whenever that day comes, I'll be grateful then as I am now. And yet I'll probably never thank him because I don't know the whistler and the whistler doesn't know me.

Johanna Baldwin is a writer and filmmaker whose works include the BBC film "Venus and Mars."