

Sephe Haven

An Excerpt from:

A SOMEDAY COURTESAN

(23) Not Reportable

Exhausted, I return to our apartment after dance class. I'm wearing a skirt and a leotard over my tights and ballet shoes. It's a small college town, so I don't lock the door behind me. I only have an hour to rest before I need to go back for my evening classes. I don't change clothes. I just plop down on the daybed in the living room. I close my eyes and drift.

A heavy weight lands on top of me. I hear my breath exhale “*uuk*.” There's a man in my apartment. On top of me.

My brain is trying to filter “this is not normal.”

He's not a huge man, but he's bigger than me. Harder than me. He's heavy and determined, pulling to lift my skirt that covers my tights and leotard. Pulling it up. Pulling it down. But his whole body weight is on top of me, so how is it going to come off? It's like he doesn't dare to *not* pin me with his body weight, but he can't accomplish anything if he does.

I don't know what to do. My heart is pounding fast, but my thoughts are slow, thinking through everything that's happening.

As he's wrestling with my skirt, my hands push at his waist. He's wearing old black corduroy pants. I can feel the ridges worn at his pointy hip bones. There are round coins in his pocket. I can smell the unwashedness of the white-gray tip of his collar poking my turned cheek. He's skinny. His clothes are tight. He doesn't have a weapon. Except for himself.

“A man is on top of me. A man is on top of me.” I want my brain to tell me what to do, but my brain is stuck. “A man is on top of me!”

His hands are under my skirt, yanking at the crotch of my leotard. This makes something in my head *bing*. Somehow, it's funny. I don't laugh, but while all this chaos is going on on the outside, with clothes being yanked and tugged and his bones poking into me, it seems absurd. It's a moment of absurdity—funny—because of my clothes. These *ridiculous* dance clothes. I can't

even get them off to pee. I have to make sure I don't drink anything before or during class and pee before I get dressed because even *I* can't get them off. But, right now, they're saving me. Funny how life is.

I almost laugh, but I don't. Why am I so slow? What's the opposite of panic? Slow motion? Hypothermia? The feeling that he doesn't have a weapon? Feeling he won't get the clothes off? I'm sensing absurdity.

My eyes are at his neck. I'm looking at his Adam's apple. My brain decides to work, reminding me that if you punch a man in his Adam's apple, you could kill him. I think about doing that, but I don't. Because, I think, if I punch him in his Adam's apple and kill him, then I am a murderer, and I can't live with that. I mean, I can live with being raped. I don't want to, but I can. I can't live with being a murderer.

I don't punch him in his Adam's apple. Instead, I pat him on his head. It surprises me. His hair is bouncy. Springy. I'd never felt an afro before. I never imagined what they would feel like. I never imagined bouncy. Hm.

He seems more panicked. Frantic. To get these clothes off me. Manic. Yanking, pulling, tugging, swearing, mashing his body from side to side. I'm scared, but I'm calm. My brain won't work, but something in me is working on its own. My arms go around him. I hug him, pat him, "shhhh shhh" him. He feels desperate. I pat his head again. It's soft. I didn't imagine it being soft either.

The soft bounciness of his hair makes me think how vulnerable we all are. Our hair being out of our control. We're just born, and it becomes whatever it is. It's ours. Our hair experience. For life. And we feel ways about it. It's a human thing. He's a person who, when he was little, had a boingy afro. Maybe there were days when he hated it, and he wished for different hair, and he cried. Then there were days when he was happy for his hair.

He's so human to me right now. I pat his head. I say, "Shhhh shhhh."

I put my palm on his shoulder blade because I feel the little boy. I feel the human. I don't know why I do this.

I'm thinking, too, he doesn't have a weapon, so it's just him and me, and we are just two humans. I hug him like a mother or a friend hugs somebody who's in distress.

He stops struggling with my clothes, calming into my arms for a second, and I don't know if he's gonna get calmer or rile up again, so I take advantage of the calm and say, "You don't want to do this. You don't want to do this. You don't want to go to jail. You don't want to have a criminal record that's just going to mess up your life, and for what? Why, this is so silly. This is so sad. All the people in your life who know you, your sister or your cousin or your mother—"

He pops up and looks at me—for the first time, *looks at me*—with the heavy weight of his body still on me, saying "Shut up, shut up, just shut up! You shut up!"

I get scared because now he seems sadder and confused and that makes him angry. Angrier.

"Don't talk about them. I don't give a shit about my—"

That shocks me.

I feel my heart banging.

It causes him to sit up. Off me. He starts to cry, and he pounds his fist into the mattress as I scootch away toward the wall. His tears are making tracks where they roll, shinier than the rest of his skin, and I don't know what to do. My back is stuck to the wall behind me. He hits the bed, and he digs into his crotch and punches the mattress and says, "Fuck! You ruined it! Now I can't."

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm sure most times you're fine," I say. "This is probably just better that you can't. Probably."

And I turn my head past the paneled walls, faking that I'm looking at a clock out of sight that I don't have, and say, "Oh my god, my roommates are going to be home any minute, and if they see you, they'll call the police." I look alarmed. I am alarmed, but I look even more alarmed with emphasis. He looks at me. I look at him.

We have a conversation with our eyes, lasers, like we're fencers, pausing in a duel. We're breathing hard, waiting for the other. The focus is so intense, my small apartment turns to gray haze. We are floating, he and I. The only sound, our labored breaths, in syncopated rhythm. I sense this is my only moment. This precarious balance will tip one way or the other.

"Just go," I say urgently. "Go. Go now. Hurry. I won't tell anyone."

He searches my face. Am I lying? His skin is still glazed under his eyes, down his cheeks where the tears were. The odorous collar that scraped my cheek and grazed my lips is flipped up on one side. There is a quarter next to his knee that had fallen out of his pocket.

He bounds off the daybed, swinging open the door. He is gone. I force myself away from the wall, pouncing to the door, snapping the lock. I sink below the window that goes to the waist of the door. I sit on the carpet and listen to my heart smash into my chest.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what happened. I don't know who to call. I don't know how to move or how long it will be before I will feel safe enough to stand up.

The police come. First, there are two. Then, one leaves when I say I was not raped. Meaning, there was no penetration. I still had my clothes on. What happened really? A wrestling match, really. The one that stays takes a report. I guess. He asks questions. Mostly about what happened on the outside. I ask if it was called attempted rape. At least. Would that be something?

He takes his description. The corduroy pants. The soft afro.

"But is it something," I ask, "if a man breaks into my apartment and tries," I say, looking at my feet, realizing my pink ballet slippers are still on my feet, "and I don't feel safe anymore?"

He wants more information. How I escaped. Why he stopped. Instinct tells me, if I explain leotards and hugging and talking of his mother, if I say I caused my would-be rapist erectile dysfunction, no. No.

“I don’t know,” I say.