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Oswald Humanities: Creative Second Place: Breaking Routine (A Short Fiction)

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Breaking Routine

Every day, Marie Jones woke up at 7:30am. There was no need for her to wake up so early. She had retired from her teaching job long ago, when the doctors had discovered the budding black spot on her husband's right lung. Money hadn't been a problem then. Her husband had been a civil engineer – he had gotten hired by the government following the Second World War, and they had a comfortable life in their loft apartment in TriBeCa. Granted, their apartment wasn't the nicest, but it was big enough, and they had rented it together when they had first gotten married in 1954. She adored that apartment, and wanted to live there until she died.

Which was why she woke up every day at 7:30.

She had managed to convince her landlord to lower the rent because she had lived there so long, because her daughter, the one she and Frank had tried so hard for, had gotten hit and killed on the street in front of the building. Cindy had been seven.

When Frank had gotten sick, they did everything they could to cure him. They went to the best hospital, saw the best doctors, and attempted the treatments that showed the most promise. The bills that arrived in their red mailbox reflected that, even with insurance. Marie didn't care. She didn't want to be left alone. Frank promised that he'd let her die first.

It was a broken promise.

The apartment that she had shared with Frank for the past 53 years was all she had left. So she made sure she kept it. But she didn't have enough money to pay the rent every month, even with her Social Security checks.

Every morning, Marie would wake up at 7:30am and get ready. She would take a shower, put on her carefully washed dress, do her hair and makeup, and pick up her walking stick from its resting place from beside the door. She stepped out the blue front door of her apartment at 8:15 exactly, just in time to catch the morning rush. Business people rushing to work, college students idling along with their independently brewed coffees, and nannies dragging kids to school, trying to keep track of them all on the morning sidewalks of New York City.

Marie had it down to a science. She would slowly and painfully walk to the corner, alternating directions based on her mood, the weather, and where she had been yesterday. If asked, she usually said she was out for a morning walk, trying to keep her old body running. That was the key, to talk to people, to always talk and be friendly. She wanted to remind them of their sweet old grandmother, someone who handed out cookies and made the best lasagna, not the crazy old hag who lived next door and only cracked open the front door to yell at the kids to quiet down. She would reach a busy intersection and nervously look back and forth, back and forth. She showed her fear of cars, a natural fear she had had since Cindy was killed. She teetered on the curb, the toes of her beige walking shoes perilously testing her balance.

Eventually, someone always noticed her. Sometimes it took five minutes, sometimes it took twenty. She got in their way, or she was spotted by a concerned tourist. So they asked her if they could help her across the street. Marie always responded to their question with the most perfect smile. Not too eager, but not too shy either. Just enough of a smile to show how grateful the old lady was for their help, that she appreciated human kindness, that her faith in humanity had been renewed by this particular stranger's kindness. Then,

Marie held out the arm that wasn't desperately clinching onto the prop cane. The stranger took it, and Marie really began her work. As she was chattering away, distracting her savior, her hand snuck into their pocket, where she located their wallet and dropped it into her oversized purse or the pocket of her cardigan.

It wasn't something Marie was proud of, but it ensured she had enough money to pay rent every month. It worked. No one ever suspected the nice old lady who was terrified of New York City traffic, and rightly so. And then, one day, someone caught her.

When Lydia found out she was pregnant, it was raining. Her first thought was, "Well, at least I already live in a good school district." Her second, unspoken, thought was, *My mother will never meet my child.* The thought hit her like a punch to the stomach, and her mind raced on. *Maybe I shouldn't have it. Kids cost a fortune now, anyways.* She frowned. *Oh shit. I don't even know who the father is. I mean, obviously it's either Rodger or Daniel, but... Great. If I have this thing, it won't have a father OR a grandmother. And an old mother! I'm already 35!* She knew, though, that she was close enough to enough people her own age that they'd help out. She wouldn't raise the child alone – if she raised it – just without the person she needed to help her raise it the most. *Mother.*

Maybe I did the test wrong. Maybe I'm misreading them. Maybe... Her thoughts trailed off in despair. The pile of piss sticks sitting on the baby changing table in the public one person bathroom at her office didn't lie – one might be faulty, but not five of them, and she wasn't a dumbass. She knew what a pink plus sign meant – it meant that she couldn't

escape the decision of going through pregnancy and raising a child without her mother to help her, comfort her, give her advice. It was unthinkable.

She sighed heavily and got up from toilet, walked over to the changing table, and started putting the pregnancy tests back in the plastic bag she had brought them in. God knows, the janitors already gossiped enough as it was. She hadn't intended to do it at work that day, but she had seen them when she had stopped at the corner store that morning for coffee, and once she had purchased them she couldn't wait to get home to find out if there was somethi - someone growing inside her. When she was done, she looked at her phone. 8:54.

It was still early in the workday, but she needed to get out of the office. To walk in the rain. To think. So she left. She stopped by her desk and got her messenger bag and umbrella on the way out, and told her boss she had a personal emergency. He frowned and started to protest, but Lydia ignored him. She wouldn't get fired, not when he had come to her cubicle the day before and first praised her and then asked for her advice. She could make something up to explain away her sudden and unexpected departure later. Right now, she just needed to get out.

She found herself stepping out of the elevator onto the ground floor, exiting the entrance lobby at a hurried walk, and finally bursting out of the building and into the cool rain. It was 9:00.

The rent was due tomorrow, she was \$75 short, and it was raining. Not the ideal situation, but that's what Marie got for taking a day off last week. She'd have to go out today in the horribly nasty weather, and hope she didn't get sick tomorrow— she'd paid rent late too many times before, and she didn't want to give her landlord any excuse to kick her out. Marie knew they were waiting for her to finally die, so they could get a rich young person in her home, a rich young person that would pay double, maybe even triple of what she was paying. TriBeCa was doing well for itself, and Marie thanked God every day for rent control.

\$75 was manageable, but she hoped she got lucky and got it in one go, so then she could go home. She might even get back in time for *The View* at 11:00. That morning she grumbled as she got ready, and moved a little slower in her reluctance to be out in the rain, so she didn't leave her apartment that day until 8:30, 15 minutes behind schedule. This meant she had missed most of the rush belonging to students, college and elementary school alike, but there were always the suits. Suits and tourists. Of course, the suits were usually a harder target, both to attract and to distract. But they also usually had a bigger payoff, which is exactly what she needed today. Suits it was, then.

Marie slowly and deliberately made her way down Church Street towards the Financial District, pausing at street corners to adjust her bulky raincoat and hoping for some kind soul to step into her path. On a whim, she decided to turn when she reached Barclay Street – she knew there were some big banks there, and lots of large office buildings just teeming with people, close to Wall Street, but far enough away that the people still had some sense of human kindness left in them. They wouldn't overlook a kindly old lady trying to cross the street without getting hit.

Lydia stepped out the doors of the office building and breathed a sigh of relief. By no means were her problems solved, but at least now she could focus on what was important. She knew there was a park a couple blocks away – sometimes she went there for her lunch break – and at the moment it seemed the perfect place to go. She needed to talk, if not to someone else, at least to herself. She didn't care if other people thought she was crazy. She hurriedly shoved the grocery bag of pregnancy tests into her unzipped messenger bag and headed towards the park, not bothering to open her umbrella.

Marie had almost gotten to the park when she saw her. The perfect target. It was a young woman, about 25 or so. She was wearing a plum pantsuit with sensible heels, and she was soaking wet. Even though she was carrying an umbrella. An umbrella and an expensive leather messenger bag. It was open, the mouth of the bag hanging wide. Obviously this lady was distracted – her blond hair looked like it had been done neatly up before it was destroyed, either by the rain or a nervous tic – but she didn't look far enough gone yet to be unreachable. Perfect. Now all Marie had to do was get in her way.

Lydia knew she must look a mess, but she didn't care. It was New York City – it was guaranteed there were people within a block of her that looked worse. She shook her head, pulling herself back to reality, and looked around. Just in time to stop herself from running straight into an elderly woman teetering on the curb in front of a crosswalk, nervously looking at the steady stream of traffic that was passing by.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t see you there!” Lydia laughed half-heartedly, trying to pull herself enough out of her own head to at least get to the park without running anyone over. She was almost there; she could see it from where she stood. She refocused her attention to the old lady again, who was babbling on about how everyone nowadays was always in a rush, and was suddenly strongly reminded of her mother. She blinked back tears and wondered what it was about this lady that reminded her of mother. She thought it was something in the face, something in the way this lady was so scared of the traffic. It was rare to find people living in New York City who were that scared of traffic – in fact, most of the time people were so desensitized to it they became reckless. Lydia waited for the lady to take a breath, and then: “Can I help you across the street?”

If there was one thing Marie was proud of, it was her ability to pick out targets and make sure she interacted with them. Just as planned, the suit had almost run into her. Just as planned, the suit then offered to help Marie across the street, aided, she was sure, by Marie’s own friendliness.

“Well, yes, thank you so much, dear.” Marie’s voice quavered. “And what’s your name?”

“My name’s Lydia.” Lydia stepped up next to Marie and took her by the arm, the messenger bag fitting snugly in-between their bodies. Lydia leaned over to look for traffic, and they stepped off the curb. Marie smiled.

“Well, Lydia, I hope your day is going well so far. I know it’s ugly outside, but you are being so kind to help me. I always get nervous crossing a street on my own.” They shuffled across the street. Lydia frowned, and Marie started to reach her hand into the messenger bag.

“Oh, well, to be honest, my day isn’t going very well so far. I have a big decision to make, and I’m not quite ready to make it.” At these words, Marie’s hand grasps a pregnancy test and pulls it out, confused. Lydia sees what Marie has done and her body stiffens.

“O-oh...” Marie stammers. “My hand must have slipped. I’m so s-sorry.”

“I don’t think your hand *accidentally* slipped into my bag,” Lydia stated coldly. Marie looked down at the thing in her hand and realized what it was. She started to cry.

“You-you’re going to have a baby!”

“Not if I can help it!”

The words slip out before Lydia can realize what she’s said. The issue here should be this attempted pickpocketing, not the matter of her pregnancy! But she finds herself wanting to know more about this old woman – she seemed fairly well off and innocent, why was she pickpocketing in the first place? Someone that reminds her of her mother shouldn’t be pickpocketing!

Marie, on the other hand, is stunned. How can this woman not want a baby? Marie had tried so hard for one, had been through two miscarriages, and when she had finally had Cindy, was overjoyed. Marie was devastated when Cindy had been killed in that accident. But that almost never happened, children rarely cause their parents that much heartache. And Lydia certainly seemed like she could afford it, what with her leather messenger bag and plum pantsuit.

Lydia can see that she's shocked the old woman with her response.

"Wh-why wouldn't you want a baby?! I loved my little girl every second she was alive! Don't you want to be a mother?"

"And I loved my mother, very much. But I don't know how she did it, I don't know how she dealt with me and all the problems I caused when I was growing up. And she isn't here to ask."

There's a long pause.

"What happened to your daughter?"

"Car accident when she was seven. She was chasing her dog."

"I'm sorry you lost your daughter."

"I'm sorry you lost your mother."