

The Prophet

The old man crawled out of his box. It was a good box, strong and new and very large, but there was plenty of room for it in his tunnel. He ran his hands over the lettering on the side. He wished *he* had a refrigerator. All those people up there, they all had refrigerators, and boxes like his. He could count them, the people, if he tried. One, every time a shadow eclipsed his silver trickle of moonlight, moonlight that came from up there and fell down, down through the towering buildings. Weaving through crackling electric wires. Swirling around clean white laundry drifting between buildings on slim lines. Brushed over by pigeons, trampled on by people, and sliding through a grate in the sidewalk down into his world.

The old man could hear them, too. He didn't know how they understood one another, all talking at once. It was so confusing, frightening, wrong. Why did they need so many words, when all that was necessary was the Truth? He couldn't understand, but then, he was not of their world, and could never be. The old man sighed. How nice it would be to have a refrigerator.

The old man closed the door to his box, and began to walk. He walked along the rusty tracks, and every time he passed under a grate, he would count the eclipses in the moonlight. One. One more. And one more, and another. There were so many, so many more than he. Soon, his tunnel sloped down, and there were no more grates. The old man stopped counting the people above, and listened to what he understood and they did not. It was faint at first, but it got stronger as he walked on. It always did. He had faith. His tunnel spoke to him with a muted rumbling that surrounded him, became him. His tunnel told him of what was, what had been, and what was to come. It was the voice of God.

The old man did not know why his tunnel spoke to him. But it was not important that he know. He reached the end of his tunnel and climbed up onto a platform. He climbed up some stairs and over some barricades and up some more stairs and down a long hall and through a door that was loosely chained shut, and then he was in their world. So many people saying so many things all at once. And he tried to tell them about his tunnel, about how God spoke to him, but

He was just an old man and no one listened to him. He stands outside an old shadowy subway station, under a flickering white light, and pigeons flit around him like ghosts. His voice rumbles, a deep thunder that I cannot hear, but can feel. That I can almost understand, almost... My hand strains against Daddy's hand, but Daddy doesn't want to stop. Daddy doesn't want to look at the old man, but I do. My eyes follow him over my shoulder, and then he is looking at me. His eyes spark, and my palms begin to sweat and I gasp and blink and then he is gone. The cloud of pigeons settles into a soft mist on the ground, flapping and cooing, and then the light goes out and the pigeons disappear. The quiet is broken only by the rumble of thunderclouds in the distance and a subway beneath our feet, and our footsteps as we walk over a grate in the sidewalk.

Daddy is tired from work, so I get dinner out of the refrigerator. It is a good refrigerator, shiny and new and very large. I wanted to keep the box to make a house out of, but Daddy said that the box was too big for our apartment and he took it away.

After dinner I try to ask Daddy about what the old man was saying, but Daddy is tired and he doesn't want to talk about it. He tells me that it was just an old man, and that it doesn't matter. I tell Daddy that I want to know about the Truth. Daddy gives me a book to read, and tells me to go to bed. I try to sleep, but I can't. I want to know the Truth. "In the beginning was the

Truth, spoke the old man. The storm clouds were fast approaching, and a peal of thunder shook the sky in warning. The pigeons fled, sparks dying in the night. There was another distant rumble, and the light above him went out. And then, in the darkness, he could see them clearly. People, more than he could count. They were all talking to him, all at once. So loudly, that they could not possibly hear the old man speak to them. They could not hear the Truth, could not know the Truth. He was trying very hard to make them understand, but they could not, and it made them angry. They talked louder, and moved closer. The old man was confused and frightened. He tried to go back to his tunnel, but the people would not let him. So he ran.

The old man no longer knew where he was. Clouds covered the moon, and around him darkness flowed, saturating and malevolent. The old man was very afraid. But he knew the Truth and he could hear the Truth, beckoning to him like a lighthouse in the storm. Fleeing the anger behind him and the darkness around him, he followed the thunder underground.

The old man could feel the tunnels calling to him. In this place, it was louder than ever before. The rails hissed, the tunnel moaned, and the old man's eyes blinked in a sudden breeze. Now, now was the time. He would at last know their Truth. He would be a Prophet.

The old man strained his failing senses. He climbed down from the platform on trembling legs, onto the tracks. His coat billowed in the wind. He could feel the rails screaming their Truth under his feet. His body was a trembling roar, and the tunnel filled with light as the old man bent down, and his hands found their Truth in the first rail, in the second rail, in the third rail and

Lightning arcs across the whirling sky, and my room is plunged into darkness. The trembling roar of thunder echoes slowly away as I lie in the dark, holding my book. Afterimages of prophecies fade from my sight, leaving me feeling helpless, alone. The sudden emptiness in my heart makes me very afraid, and I grab frantically at the light beside my bed. My hand touches the table, the shade, and then my palm closes on the hot bulb, and pain hisses through me and I scream. Eyes smarting, I press my trembling hand into my book, trying to deaden the pain.

I can hear Daddy's anxious footsteps coming toward my door, louder and louder and then the door opens and all I can see is white light, blinding and pure. I blink my eyes and the soft dark figure of my father appears behind the flashlight. I open the book and look at my hand. There is no more pain, only a burn scar, thick across my palm.