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# A Bolt from the Blue

FICTION BY STEPHEN D. SENTURIA

IT WAS AN ORDINARY MARCH DAY. I was walking through the canyons of downtown toward my job. Crisp blue sky, bursts of wind that changed direction at every corner, the bakery smells competing with diesel exhaust from the buses. As I rounded the corner, there they were, arguing. A hulk of a man in a navy blue coat with shaggy dark hair escaping the edges of a matching ski cap; she, a little bit of a woman, in a brown coat, no hat, brown straight hair. She said, "You have no right..." and then he slapped her. Hard. Hard enough to knock her sideways. "You bastard," she screamed. "Get away from me."

I stopped, as did a dozen others, forming a loose ring around the couple. He paid no attention, reaching for the collar of her coat. "If I ever even think you're going to see him again, I'll kill you."

Through her tears, "But he's my friend. That's all. My friend. Don't you understand the idea of a friend?"

"Don't give me that friend crap. He's hitting on you, you're leading him on, and it's got to stop." Then he noticed the crowd. "What are all you looking at? Get the hell outta here and leave us alone. Or do you want some of what she's getting?"

The circle of onlookers stepped back a bit, and the man next to me said "Should we get a cop?" I nodded, and he went looking. I desperately wanted to intervene, but I was frozen in place, my stomach knotted with fear. He was big and strong and angry, and I'm just me, basically a coward. Been that way ever since I got clocked in the high school gym when I stupidly told a jerk to stop behaving like a jerk. It left me with a creaky jaw joint, a perennial reminder of that one-punch loss to a bully.

And then it was over. He grabbed her arm, pushing past two women who were watching, dragging her with him, she no longer protesting his ownership. By the time the cop came, there was nothing to tell him.

As we dispersed and resumed our normal paths, I noticed my pulse throbbing at something like double the normal rate. I couldn't get the image of that poor girl out of my head. He had struck her right out in public, and she yelled at him, but she didn't run away or ask for help. She actually left with him. Was he going to beat her some more? Would he end up killing her? Shouldn't I have said something? Could I have? ♦

