

## Zebra

By Wendy Tong

On my way to the subway, I look up. The city is just waking from its slumber. The sky is a dreamy blue, smeared with pink and lilac-gray. Sunlight leaks through the clouds like an egg yolk. After a moment of wonder, I stuff my hands into coat pockets to shield them from the cold and hurry into the station.

There is an odd assortment of people in this subway car. People are reading newspapers and books, a welcome surprise in the digital age. A woman with talon-like nails, painted hot pink, swipes on her phone. I admire her earrings: each hoop could fit a grapefruit. My mind drifts to the sister sitting in the hospital room. She had been wearing hoops too, though hers could only fit chickpeas.

The subway car breaks ground, and sunlight filters in through the windows. We ascend and soon are punching through the midriffs of surrounding apartment buildings. I fiddle with my phone, then put it away. My thoughts wander back to the sister in the hospital room and the woman sitting upright in bed.

The sister was dedicated. Without prompting, she'd pulled out a binder brimming with pathology slides, its laminated pages displaying colorful images of stained microscopic cells. They almost looked like works of art, if I hadn't known better. *Look here, and here. See how the cores are visible? That's why it's called central core disease. It causes muscle weakness; hers is quite severe. It's autosomal dominant, you know.* She pointed to each page with a neatly trimmed and unpainted fingernail, chickpea hoops swaying.

A man on the subway leans his elbows on his knees in classic tripod position, though he does not appear to be in respiratory distress. I take a moment to remind myself that not everyone I see is a clinical vignette. The man nurses a glass tumbler of coffee in one hand; in the other he holds a phone, which commands only half his attention.

Both women in the hospital room offered me their full attention: the dedicated sister with her binder of pathological artwork, and the woman sitting upright in bed whose muscle cells filled the binder's pages. *You just missed the neurology consult,* the bedridden woman was saying to her sister as I walked in. *I know how you like to be here for that kind of stuff.* In turn, the sister sighed with disappointment. *I'm sorry,* I said. *You must've told your story five times today already.* And I had come in to be the sixth. Nonetheless, the woman sitting upright in bed obliged until her voice became hoarse, reliving harrowing details of countless clinic visits, repeated muscle biopsies, and mistaken diagnoses. I was an unseasoned medical student, a stranger in a short white coat who clutched a stethoscope with fumbling fingers. But she was kind to me, sharing words of

wisdom that she hoped would one day shape me into a better doctor. *You know the saying, "When you hear hoofbeats, look for horses, not zebras." Well, what do you do when someone is a zebra? The best advice I can give you is to never stop thinking outside of the box.*

The man sitting across from me on the subway is wearing a baseball cap with an embroidered yellow "M" and a funky-print tie. A pen is tucked neatly into his shirt pocket. He flips briskly through a sheaf of printed papers, and I catch a glimpse of a sawtooth graph.

The sawtooth tracings of the bedridden woman's vital signs zigzagged on a screen in the corner of the room as the sister told me grimly that the clinical trial they hoped to enter would only accept ten people. The tracings on the screen charted the trajectory of their hope of discovering a treatment – rising at one point, dwindling the next.

The man on the subway with the clear tumbler of coffee has taken several swigs, and now his drink is almost gone. I try to imagine *him* as clear. I picture his caffeine level rising, the black coffee filling his silhouette.

*What happened on Saturday when she suddenly fainted has never happened before, the sister said quietly. I don't know if it was from the diseases she already has, or, God forbid, if it's something new.* I stayed quiet with them. I pictured their fear, filling their silhouettes.

When we reach the next station, the woman with the hot pink talons and grapefruit hoops stands up to leave, followed by the man with the funky-print tie and sawtooth graph. As I mentally bid them goodbye, I wonder which of these details might be a zebra. The woman with the hot pink talons most likely does not have to worry about her daughter inheriting a rare genetic disease, while the man with the funky-print tie most likely does not have to analyze the chart of his own vital signs. But then again, these are things I cannot know for sure.

Perhaps in some corner of their lives, they are the ones sitting upright in bed; perhaps they are the ones carrying binders of artwork.

Just as they leave the subway car, a mother and two sons enter. The mother ushers her children onto nearby seats as they fight over a handheld game. The smaller boy yanks it from the other with surprising strength.

The woman sitting upright in bed was surprisingly strong. Her courage shone through her quiet words and through the look in her eyes, spreading like an egg-yolk sun leaking through the clouds.

At last, the subway doors slide open at my stop near the hospital. The light is blinding, but the warmth is welcome. I flex my chilled fingers and step outside, feeling as though I am striding between two worlds.

The hands of the woman sitting upright in bed had been chilled, too. I held them for a moment, too brief, before I left her hospital room.

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