**Paranoia**

**By** [**Shirley Jackson**](http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/shirley-jackson)

Mr. Halloran Beresford, pleasantly tired after a good day in the office, still almost clean-shaven after eight hours, his pants still neatly pressed, pleased with himself particularly for remembering, stepped out of the candy shop with a great box under his arm and started briskly for the corner. There were twenty small-size gray suits like Mr. Beresford’s on every New York block, fifty men still clean-shaven and pressed after a day in an air-cooled office, a hundred small men, perhaps, pleased with themselves for remembering their wives’ birthdays. Mr. Beresford was going to take his wife out to dinner, he decided, going to see if he could get last-minute tickets to a show, taking his wife candy. It had been an exceptionally good day, altogether, and Mr. Beresford walked along swiftly, humming musically to himself.

He stopped on the corner, wondered whether he would save more time by taking a bus or by trying to catch a taxi in the crowd. It was a long trip downtown and Mr. Beresford ordinarily enjoyed the quiet half hour on top of a Fifth Avenue bus, perhaps reading his paper. He disliked the subway intensely, and found the public display and violent exercise necessary to catch a taxi usually more than he was equal to. However, tonight he had spent a lot of time waiting in line in the candy store to get his wife’s favorite chocolates, and if he were going to get home before dinner was on the table he really had to hurry a little. Mr. Beresford went a few steps into the street, waved at a taxi, said “Taxi!” in a voice that went helplessly into a falsetto, and slunk back, abashed, to the sidewalk while the taxi went by uncomprehending. A man in a light hat stopped next to Mr. Beresford on the sidewalk and for a minute, in the middle of the crowd, he stared at Mr. Beresford and Mr. Beresford stared at him as people sometimes do without caring particularly what they see. What Mr. Beresford saw was a thin face under the light hat, a small mustache, a coat collar turned up. Funny-looking guy, Mr. Beresford thought, lightly touching his clean-shaven lip. Perhaps the man thought Mr. Beresford’s almost unconscious gesture was offensive; at any rate he frowned and looked Mr. Beresford up and down before he turned away. Ugly customer, Mr. Beresford thought.

The Fifth Avenue bus Mr. Beresford usually took came slipping up to the corner and Mr. Beresford, pleased not to worry about a taxi, started for the stop. He had reached out his hand to take the rail inside the bus door when he was roughly elbowed aside and the ugly customer in the light hat shoved on ahead of him. Mr. Beresford muttered and started to follow, but the bus door closed on the packed crowd inside and the last thing Mr. Beresford saw as the bus went off down the street was the man in the light hat grinning at him from inside the door.

“*There*’*s* a dirty trick,” Mr. Beresford told himself, and settled his shoulders irritably in his coat. Still under the influence of his annoyance, he ran a few steps out into the street and waved again at a taxi, not trusting his voice, and was almost run down by a delivery truck. As Mr. Beresford skidded back to the sidewalk the truck driver leaned out and yelled something unrecognizable at Mr. Beresford and when Mr. Beresford saw the people around him on the corner laughing he decided to start walking downtown; in two blocks he would reach another bus stop, a good corner for taxis, and a subway station; much as Mr. Beresford disliked the subway, he might still have to take it, to get home in any sort of time. Walking downtown, his candy box under his arm, his gray suit almost unaffected by the crush on the corner, Mr. Beresford decided to swallow his annoyance and remember it was his wife’s birthday; he began to hum again as he walked.

He watched the people as he walked along, his perspective sharpened by being a man who has just succeeded in forgetting an annoyance; surely the girl in the very high-heeled shoes, coming toward him with a frown on her face, was not so able to put herself above petty trifles, or maybe she was frowning because of the shoes; the old lady and man looking at the shopwindows were quarrelling. The funny-looking guy in the light hat coming quickly through the crowd looked as though he hated someone . . . the funny-looking guy in the light hat; Mr. Beresford turned clean around in the walking line of people and watched the man in the light hat turn abruptly and start walking downtown, about ten feet in back of Mr. Beresford. What do you know about that, Mr. Beresford marvelled to himself, and began to walk a little quickly. Probably got off the bus for some reason, wrong bus maybe. Then why would he start walking uptown instead of catching another bus where he was? Mr. Beresford shrugged and passed two girls walking together and talking both at once.

Halfway from the corner he wanted, Mr. Beresford realized with a sort of sick shock that the man in the light hat was at his elbow, walking steadily along next to him. Mr. Beresford turned his head the other way and slowed his step. The other man slowed down as well, without looking at Mr. Beresford.

Nonsense, Mr. Beresford thought, without troubling to work it out any further than that. He settled his candy box firmly under his arm and cut abruptly across the uptown line of people and into a shop, a souvenir and notion shop, he realized as he came through the door. There were two or three people inside—a woman and a little girl, a sailor—and Mr. Beresford retired to the far end of the counter and began to fuss with an elaborate cigarette box on which was written “Souvenir of New York City,” with a trylon and a perisphere painted beneath.

“Isn’t this cute?” the mother said to the little girl, and they both began to laugh enormously over the match holder made in the form of a toilet; the matches were to go in the bowl, and on the cover, Mr. Beresford could see, was a trylon and a perisphere, with “Souvenir of New York City” written above.

The man in the light hat came into the shop and Mr. Beresford turned his back and busied himself picking up one thing after another from the counter; with half his mind he was trying to find something that did not say “Souvenir of New York City” and with the other half of his mind he was wondering about the man in the light hat. The question of what the man in the light hat wanted was immediately subordinate to the question of *whom* he wanted; if his light-hatted designs were against Mr. Beresford they must be nefarious, else why had he not announced them before now? The thought of accosting the man and demanding his purpose crossed Mr. Beresford’s mind fleetingly, and was succeeded, as always in an equivocal situation, by Mr. Beresford’s vivid recollection of his own small size and innate cautiousness. Best, Mr. Beresford decided, to avoid this man. Thinking this, Mr. Beresford walked steadily toward the doorway of the shop, intending to pass the man in the light hat and go out and catch his bus home.

He had not quite reached the man in the light hat when the shop’s clerk came around the end of the counter and met Mr. Beresford with a genial smile and a vehement “See anything you like, Mister?”

“Not tonight, thanks,” Mr. Beresford said, moving left to avoid the clerk, but the clerk moved likewise and said, “Got some nice things you didn’t look at.”

“No, thanks,” Mr. Beresford said, trying to make his tenor voice firm.

“Take a look at it,” the clerk insisted. This was unusually persistent even for such a clerk; Mr. Beresford looked up and saw the man in the light hat on his right, bearing down on him. Over the shoulders of the two men he could see that the shop was empty. The street looked very far away, the people passing in either direction looked smaller and smaller; Mr. Beresford realized that he was being forced to step backward as the two men advanced on him.

“Easy does it,” the man in the light hat said to the clerk. They continued to move forward slowly.

“See here now,” Mr. Beresford said, with the ineffectuality of the ordinary man caught in such a crisis; he still clutched his box of candy under his arm. “See *here*,” he said, feeling the solid weight of the wall behind him.

“Ready,” the man in the light hat said. The two men tensed and Mr. Beresford, with a wild yell, broke between them and ran for the door. He heard a sound more like a snarl than anything else behind him and the feet coming after him. I’m safe on the street, Mr. Beresford thought as he came through the door into the line of people, as long as there are lots of people they can’t do anything to me. He looked back, walking downtown between a fat woman with many packages and a girl and a boy leaning on one another’s shoulders, and he saw the clerk standing in the door of the shop looking after him; the man with the light hat was not in sight. Mr. Beresford shifted the box of candy so that his right arm was free and thought, Perfectly silly. It’s still broad daylight. How they ever hoped to get away with it . . .

The man in the light hat was on the corner ahead, waiting. Mr. Beresford hesitated in his walk and then thought, It’s preposterous, all these people watching. He walked boldly down the street; the man in the light hat was not even watching him, but was leaning calmly against a building lighting a cigarette. Mr. Beresford reached the corner, darted quickly into the street, and yelled boisterously, “Taxi!” in a great voice he had never suspected he possessed until now. A taxi stopped as though not daring to disregard that great shout, and Mr. Beresford moved gratefully toward it. His hand was on the door handle when another hand closed over his and Mr. Beresford was aware of the light hat brushing his cheek.

“Come on if you’re coming,” the taxi driver said; the door was open and Mr. Beresford, resisting the push that urged him into the taxi, slipped his hand out from under the other hand and ran back to the sidewalk. A crosstown bus had stopped on the corner and Mr. Beresford, no longer thinking, hurried into it, dropped a nickel into the coin register, and went to the back of the bus and sat down. The man in the light hat sat a little ahead, between Mr. Beresford and the door. Mr. Beresford put his box of candy on his lap and tried to think. Obviously the man in the light hat was not carrying a grudge all this time about Mr. Beresford’s almost unconscious gesture toward the mustache, unless he were peculiarly sensitive. In any case, there was the clerk in the souvenir shop; Mr. Beresford realized suddenly that the clerk in the souvenir shop was a very odd circumstance indeed. He set the clerk aside to think about later and went back to the man in the light hat. If it was not the insult to the mustache, what was it? And then another thought caught Mr. Beresford breathless: how long, then, had the man in the light hat been following him? He thought back along the day: he had left his office with a group of people, all talking cheerfully, all reminding Mr. Beresford that it was his wife’s birthday; they had escorted Mr. Beresford to the candy shop and left him there. He had been in his office all day except for lunch with three fellows in the office; Mr. Beresford’s mind leaped suddenly from the lunch to his first sight of the man in the light hat at the bus stop; it seemed that the man in the light hat had been trying to push him *on* the bus into the crowd, instead of pushing in ahead. In that case, once he was on the bus . . .  Mr. Beresford looked around. In the bus he was riding on now there were only five people left. One was the driver, one Mr. Beresford, one the man in the light hat, sitting slightly ahead of Mr. Beresford. The two others were an old lady with a shopping bag and a man who looked as though he might be a foreigner. Foreigner, Mr. Beresford thought, while he looked at the man, foreigner, foreign plot, spies. Better not rely on any foreigner, Mr. Beresford thought.

The bus was going swiftly along between high dark buildings. Mr. Beresford, looking out of the window, decided that they were in a factory district, remembered that they had been going east, and decided to wait until they got to one of the lighted, busy sections before he tried to get off. Peering off into the growing darkness, Mr. Beresford noticed an odd thing. There had been someone standing on the corner beside a sign saying “Bus Stop” and the bus had not stopped, even though the dim figure waved its arms. Surprised, Mr. Beresford glanced up at the street sign, noticed that it said “E. 31 St.” at the same moment that he reached for the cord to signal the driver he wanted to get off. As he stood up and went down to the aisle, the foreign-looking man rose also and went to the door beside the driver. “Getting off,” the foreign man said, and the bus slowed. Mr. Beresford pressed forward and somehow the old lady’s shopping bag got in his way and spilled, sending small items—a set of blocks, a package of paper clips—spilling in all directions.

“Sorry,” Mr. Beresford said desperately as the bus doors opened. He began to move forward again and the old lady caught his arm and said, “Don’t bother if you’re in a hurry. I can get them, dear.” Mr. Beresford tried to shake her off and she said, “If this is your stop don’t worry. It’s perfectly all right.”

A coil of pink ribbon was caught around Mr. Beresford’s shoe; the old lady said, “It was clumsy of me, leaving my bag right in the aisle.”

As Mr. Beresford broke away from her the doors closed and the bus started. Resigned, Mr. Beresford got down on one knee in the swaying bus and began to pick up paper clips, blocks, a box of letter paper that had opened and spilled sheets and envelopes all over the floor. “I’m so sorry,” the old lady said sweetly. “It was all my fault, too.”

Once, over his shoulder, Mr. Beresford saw the man in the light hat sitting comfortably. He was smoking and his head was thrown back and his eyes were shut. Mr. Beresford gathered together the old lady’s shopping as well as he could, and then made his way forward to stand by the driver. “Getting off,” Mr. Beresford said.

“Can’t stop in the middle of the block,” the driver said, not turning his head.

“The next stop, then,” Mr. Beresford said.

The bus moved rapidly on. Mr. Beresford, bending down to see the streets out the front window, saw a sign saying “Bus Stop.”

“Here,” he said.

“What?” the driver said, going past.

“Listen,” Mr. Beresford said. “I want to get off.”

“It’s O.K. with me,” the driver said. “Next stop.”

“You just passed one,” Mr. Beresford said.

“No one waiting there,” the driver said. “Anyway, you didn’t tell me in time.” Mr. Beresford waited. After a minute he saw another bus stop and said, “O.K.”

The bus did not stop, but went past the sign without slowing down.

“Report me,” the driver said.

“Listen, now,” Mr. Beresford said, and the driver turned one eye up at him; he seemed to be amused.

“Report me,” the driver said. “My number’s right here on this card.”

“If you don’t stop at the next stop,” Mr. Beresford said, “I shall smash the glass in the door and shout for help.”

“What with?” the driver said. “The box of candy?”

“How do you know it’s—” Mr. Beresford said before he realized that if he got into a conversation he would miss the next bus stop. It had not occurred to him that he could get off anywhere except at a bus stop; he saw lights ahead and at the same time the bus slowed down and Mr. Beresford, looking quickly back, saw the man in the light hat stretch and get up.

The bus pulled to a stop in front of a bus sign; there was a group of stores.

“O.K.,” the bus driver said to Mr. Beresford, “you were so anxious to get off.” The man in the light hat got off at the rear door. Mr. Beresford, standing by the open front door, hesitated and said, “I guess I’ll stay on for a while.”

“Last stop,” the bus driver said. “Everybody off.” He looked sardonically up at Mr. Beresford. “Report me if you want to,” he said. “My number’s right on that card there.”

Mr. Beresford got off and went directly up to the man in the light hat, standing on the sidewalk. “This is perfectly ridiculous,” he said emphatically. “I don’t understand any of it and I want you to know that the first policeman I see—”

He stopped when he realized that the man in the light hat was looking not at him but, bored and fixedly, over his shoulder. Mr. Beresford turned and saw a policeman standing on the corner.

“Just you wait,” he said to the man in the light hat, and started for the policeman. Halfway to the policeman he began to wonder again: what did he have to report? A bus that would not stop when directed to, a clerk in a souvenir shop who cornered customers, a mysterious man in a light hat—and why? Mr. Beresford realized suddenly that there was nothing he could tell the policeman: he looked over his shoulder and saw the man in the light hat watching him, and then Mr. Beresford bolted down a subway entrance. He had a nickel in his hand by the time he reached the bottom of the steps, and he went right through the turnstile; to the left it was downtown and he ran that way.

He was figuring as he ran: he’ll think if I’m very stupid I’d head downtown, if I’m smarter than that I’d go uptown, if I’m really smart I’d go downtown. Does he think I’m middling smart or very smart?

The man in the light hat reached the downtown platform only a few seconds after Mr. Beresford and sauntered down the platform, his hands in his pockets. Mr. Beresford sat down on the bench listlessly. It’s no good, he thought, no good at all, he knows just how smart I am.

The train came blasting into the station, Mr. Beresford ran in the door and saw the light hat disappear into a door of the next car. Just as the doors were closing Mr. Beresford dived, caught the door, and would have been out except for a girl who seized his arm and shouted, “Harry! Where in God’s name are you going?”

The door was held halfway by Mr. Beresford’s body, his arm left inside with the girl, who seemed to be holding it with all her strength. “Isn’t this a fine thing,” she said to the people in the car, “he sure doesn’t want to see his old friends.”

A few people laughed; most of them were watching.

“Hang on to him, sister,” someone said.

The girl laughed and tugged on Mr. Beresford’s arm. “He’s gonna get away,” she said laughingly to the people in the car and a big man stepped to her with a grin and said, “If you gotta have him that bad, we’ll bring him in for you.”

Mr. Beresford felt the holding grasp on his arm turn suddenly to an irresistible force which drew him in through the doors, and they closed behind him. Everyone in the car was laughing at him by now, and the big man said, “That ain’t no way to a treat a lady, chum.”

Mr. Beresford looked around for the girl but she had melted into the crowd somewhere and the train was moving. After a minute the people in the car stopped looking at him and Mr. Beresford smoothed his coat and found that his box of candy was still intact.

The subway train was going downtown. Mr. Beresford, who was now racking his brains for detective tricks, for mystery-story dodges, thought of one that seemed infallible. He stayed docilely on the train, as it went downtown, and got a seat at Twenty-third Street. At Fourteenth he got off, the light hat following, and went up the stairs and into the street. As he had expected, the large department store ahead of him advertised “Open till 9 tonight” and the doors swung wide, back and forth, with people going constantly in and out. Mr. Beresford went in. The store bewildered him at first—counters stretching away in all directions, the lights much brighter than anywhere else, the voices clamoring. Mr. Beresford moved slowly along beside a counter; it was stockings first, thin and tan and black and gauzy, and then it was handbags, piles on sale, neat solitary ones in the cases, and then it was medical supplies, with huge almost human figures wearing obscene trusses, standing right there on the counter, and people coming embarrassedly to buy. Mr. Beresford turned the corner and came to a counter of odds and ends. Scarves too cheap to be at the scarf counter, postcards, a bin marked “Any item 25¢,” dark glasses. Uncomfortably, Mr. Beresford bought a pair of dark glasses and put them on.

He went out of the store at an entrance far away from the one he had used to go in; he could have chosen any of eight or nine entrances, but this seemed complicated enough. There was no sign of the light hat, no one tried to hinder Mr. Beresford as he stepped up to the taxi stand, and, although debating taking the second or the third car, finally took the one that was offered him and gave his home address.

He reached his apartment building without mishap, stole cautiously out of the taxi and into the lobby. There was no light hat, no odd person watching for Mr. Beresford. In the elevator, alone, with no one to see which floor button he pressed, Mr. Beresford took a long breath and began to wonder if he had dreamed his wild trip home. He rang his apartment bell and waited; then his wife came to the door and Mr. Beresford, suddenly tired out, went into his home.

“You’re *terribly* late, darling,” his wife said affectionately, and then, “But what’s the matter?”

He looked at her; she was wearing her blue dress and that meant she knew it was her birthday and expected him to take her out; he handed her the box of candy limply and she took it, hardly noticing in her anxiety over him. “What on *earth* has happened?” she asked. “Darling, come in here and sit down. You look terrible.”

He let her lead him into the living room, into his own chair where it was comfortable, and he lay back.

“Is there something wrong?” she was asking anxiously, fussing over him, loosening his tie, smoothing his hair. “Are you sick? Were you in an accident? What *has* happened?”

He realized that he seemed more tired than he really was, and was glorying in all this attention. He sighed deeply and said, “Nothing. Nothing wrong. Tell you in a minute.”

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll get you a drink.”

He put his head back against the soft chair as she went out. Never knew that door had a key, his mind registered dimly as he heard it turn. Then he was on his feet with his head against the door listening to her at the telephone in the hall.

She dialled and waited. Then: “Listen,” she said, “listen, he came here after all. I’ve got him.” ♦

*Freewrite Questions: Choose any two, 1 full page minimum, use textual evidence to support your response.*

1. *At what point does Halloran Beresford’s experiences start to justify his paranoia? How much of this is in his head and how much is legitimate paranoia?*
2. *Were there any characters that Halloran Beresford encounters that had nothing to do with any supposed conspiracy? Identify who is in on it, and who is not, justify your answer.*
3. *What happens next? Write the next page or so of the story from the point of the ending phone call.*