

CRAIG REINBOLD

GIRL ON TRACKS

I'm sitting on my jacket because I don't want to have to wash my slacks tonight, and because the stone floor is cold, and because I don't know why—I just took it off and sat on it without thinking. My back is against a pillar on the far side of the subway platform, twenty feet from the bloody nose of the train.

Things I never noticed before: the ceiling above me is curved downward, tiled with blue and white squares. Some of the tiles are chipped, and beneath the veneer is a gray, concrete color that matches the grout, which in many places is stained black. The lighting is fluorescent, and one of the fixtures is plugged into a dirty orange extension cord that snakes through a rodent-sized hole in the ceiling.

The textured anti-slip strips at the edge of the platform are Crayola cerulean. The strips are some kind of plastic, and they seem to be glued to the dull granite slabs that are the floor. The edge of the strip behind me looks to be coming unglued, a slight lip forming where it should be flush with the stone, a tripping hazard maybe. Maybe she tripped, I think, maybe.

About half an hour ago, a girl standing on the platform just behind me, close to my shoulder, launched herself in front of the express train.

I'm sitting here because this is where I was told to sit by the two policemen who seem to have taken charge of things.

"They think you might have pushed her." There's another guy leaning against the adjacent side of the pillar. I don't know what he looks like. I wasn't paying attention when he sat down. His voice is deep, though, and in my head I picture him old, older than me. "I wouldn't worry, though," the voice says. "I saw it all."

"Why would they think that?" I ask, my eyes on the ground.

"I don't know. You were close enough to have done it. Anyways, the way I saw it, that girl was on a mission to die. It looked like you tried to grab her."

"She knocked my phone out of my hand. It fell on the track."

"I wonder if it survived."

I imagine a mob above on the street, raising hell for anyone in a Transit Authority vest. Five fifteen on a Thursday in a city with a million commuters, and the station's almost empty. There are the two cops, the EMS crew, and

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this guy next to me. There is also the jumper on the tracks, a girl in a pink jacket. Dark hair, I think. I never got a real look at her.

There's a stretcher by the edge of the platform, and every minute or so a guy in an orange jumpsuit crawling around on the tracks stands up, stretches his back, and hands another piece to the EMS woman on the platform, who zips it into the black bag on the stretcher. I am consciously trying not to look, but the colors are making it hard not to—the pink jacket, fire-engine galoshes, bright green...something. All of this out of the corner of my eye.

"Maybe it was Björk," the guy next to me says. He's on the side of the pillar closest to where they're working. Cleaning. I suppose he's watching everything. I hear him chuckle softly. I know who Björk is, but I don't get the joke, don't see why it's funny.

I temp at an advertising agency. I spent an hour this morning making coffee, pouring coffee, drinking coffee, three hours before lunch writing a limerick about Handies Candies, and another four hours this afternoon doing nothing, flirting with the other temp. For dinner tonight, I was going to make something simple, canned soup and a sandwich. At six thirty I usually watch *The Office*, sometimes watch it again at ten thirty. Sometimes I read. Jon Krakauer's *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* is newly arrived on my kitchen table. Tillman was a football player who turned down a three-million-dollar contract to go play Army Ranger in Afghanistan, and then another Army Ranger accidentally shot him in the head. My mother just sent it to me, I think because my little brother is in the Marines and is in Afghanistan, and she thinks it somehow applies.

Friday night, Saturday night, I'll go out with my roommates and probably drink too much. I only drink the cheapest beer and always give the same excuse, that I'm saving for something better. Certain types of girls find this cute.

I am from a small Midwestern town. I went to a fine state college. I now live in a substantial city, and I make barely enough money to cover rent. And I am fine with this.

When I was eight, I was diagnosed with Legg-Calvé-Perthes disease, which nobody I meet has ever heard of, but which laid me up for ten months: osteochondritis of the upper femoral epiphysis, otherwise described as arthritis of the hip, severe enough to cause me to limp for years, which led to an underdeveloped sinister femoral region; my left thigh is thirty percent

smaller than my right. I was in physical therapy until I was sixteen, still suffer from arthritis, and still walk with a limp. Even so, if asked, I would say I'm happy enough, lucky enough, one of the fortunate ones. I am twenty-six years old, and before today I had never seen anyone die.

The train finally stopped forty feet from where I was standing. I imagine it must have dragged her that whole way. Her, and my phone. "Why would I do something like that?" I ask the guy next to me, without turning my head. "Why would they think I pushed her?"

"I don't know. Anyway, I heard *that* one,"—he points at the beefier, balder of the two cops facing us—"I heard him say that somebody was up in the office looking at the tapes, and that he has to give an okay before you can go."

"Maybe you shouldn't point at them."

"I'm not afraid of them. We didn't do anything wrong. You tried to be a hero."

There's not much I can say to that, other than that it's not true, which I don't say. I lean forward, around the pillar—I see part of an arm, feet, and legs stretching out perpendicular to me. I see a black T-shirt sleeve, white piping around the bicep. The shirt is tucked into black jeans, cinched by a worn brown belt.

"So why'd they tell you to stay?" I ask him.

"They didn't." He folds his legs in, so he's sitting cross-legged. "I just wanted to see what was going on." He stretches his legs out again, and I notice that his black jeans are tucked into tan boots that lace up high, above the ankle—desert combat boots. "You know, if you stand perfectly still in a crowd and look around like you're looking for something in particular, and if you don't move when everybody else is moving, people just assume you're supposed to be there. Even these cops, I guess." The boots look used. "Not that I'm some kind of morbid freak or anything," he goes on. "I just thought it might be kind of inspiring, you know. Finding affirmation of life in death, that sort of thing. Seeking the sublime," he says. "That's what I do."

I reach around the pillar. "My name's Nick."

He takes my hand. "I'm Cosby."

I lean closer and catch his profile, which is mostly sideburns. I see a notebook on his lap and one of those fancy uni-ball pens. "What are you writing?"

"I'm taking notes," he says. "I carry this wherever I go in case I think of something."

“You’re a journalist?”

He turns his head toward me, and I see that his chin and cheeks are pink and clean-shaven. There’s a patch of red under his lip, maybe the remnants of acne. His deep voice suddenly cracks. “I go to school at Columbia, downtown.”

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Nineteen,” he says, then adds, “twenty in February.” He cocks his head to the side. “I’m working on a haiku. I write one a day, for a blog.”

I nod. “What did you write yesterday?”

He flips a page in the notebook, clears his throat:

“Ed, outside the Art
Institute, sings to pay rent.
I admire his chutzpah.”

I mouth the last line. “I think you’ve got one too many syllables in that last part.”

“It’s not so important,” he says and flips back to the page with his notes from today. He snuffles and swipes a pink-scarred knuckle under his nostril.

I want to ask him why he’s wearing those combat boots, if they’re his, if he served—they’re dirty, look old, thoroughly worn—or if he bought them secondhand. I want to ask him, but I don’t. He must have seen me looking, though, because he nods toward his feet and tells me, “They were my brother’s.”

“That’s it!” The guy down on the tracks shouts to the EMS woman on the platform. Within a minute, everything’s packed up. She rolls the stretcher past me on the way to the elevator, and I see a patch sewn onto the back pocket of her jumpsuit—it’s the figure from the movie poster of *M*A*S*H*, a pair of sexy women’s legs in heels and, in lieu of a torso, a hand, two fingers extended, flashing a peace sign. I wonder where she got it.

I rub my eyes, notice how dirty my palm is from touching the floor, and suddenly the scent of shit grime on stone flares my nostrils. “We need a hose!” the beefy, balding cop shouts at somebody up the stairs. And all of a sudden I feel incredibly sick—something awful, dizzying, like motion sickness.

“Hey!” the other officer yells. I hear him but am pressing my fingers into my eyes. “Hey!” he yells again, and after he yells a third time, I realize he’s hollering at me. I push myself up, grab my jacket, hoist my bag, and walk over to him. He watches me, my limp, with his thumbs tucked into his vest.

His partner has my phone. “Is this yours?” he asks, already holding it out for me to take. “We found it on the track. Still in one piece.” His head ticks to one side as he says this, I think to emphasize the miracle.

“Thank you.” I drop it into my pocket. I look over my shoulder for Cosby, but he’s gone.

“We saw the video,” the beefier one says. He has a really thick neck. “She knocked it out of your hand.” But his voice is surprisingly high, almost falsetto. “Sorry you had to stay so long. We just wanted to make sure you were on hand in case we needed a statement.” I see him look at my leg, the one that doesn’t move like it’s supposed to. His nose twitches. “Anyway,” he says. “You can go now. We appreciate your patience.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he says, and as soon as he does, I can’t stop myself, and I turn to the train, the scene of everything.

There is an awful lot of blood, a lot of it dark, congealed. Blood is smeared up and down the front of the train. Up higher, the windshield is covered, too, the blood frozen in swirls where it looks like someone tried to rag the glass clean.

“It helps if you think of it like a movie,” the beefy cop is saying. The other one says something else that doesn’t register. I turn back to them just as a stream of high-pressure water strikes the front of the train and ricochets onto us. They turn toward the guy with the hose, yelling, and without thinking I walk away, moving as quickly as I can toward the stairs, my white shirt covered with water spots. I want to take the stairs and run, take three steps at a time and launch myself onto the street above, but as it is, I can barely manage a fast walk to the escalator.

I reach for the rubber handrail and let it pull me on. I draw in a breath of stale, recycled air and try to calm myself down. I look closer at the water spots on my sleeves and see they’re tinted pink, like diluted red watercolor paint. I’m halfway up the escalator now; my diaphragm spasms, and I fight back a dry heave.

The rectangle of dusky light above me grows bigger, until finally my head breaks through, level with the street and rising. I look up at the strip of blue

and orange sky above me, open my mouth, and swallow a lungful of slightly less tainted November air. The uppermost windows of the buildings along the street are lit up red and gold and look hot to touch, as if they're on fire. The escalator slides my feet onto the sidewalk, and a mass of pigeons scatters to the other side of the street where they light on the railing of the other subway entrance.

There's a red and white fire department ambulance parked nearby, and a bunch of rubbernecks are standing behind a line of police tape. A fire truck and a police car are parked on the cross street. I spot Cosby ahead of me, planted in the middle of the sidewalk.

He's wearing an oatmeal-colored wool sweater now, his black jeans still tucked into his brother's boots. He's facing me, head down, scribbling in his notebook. He looks tall and thin and staid, oblivious to the lights changing around him, oblivious to the wave of the city's workforce breaking around him as if he were part of the landscape, a clump of hearty reeds at ease in a current. I walk over to him.

76 My heart is racing, like when you swim the length of an Olympic-sized pool underwater, and when you finally break the surface at the other end, you find you can only gasp quick, shallow breaths, and it feels like your lungs and racing heart will never catch up to the demand.

Cosby doesn't notice me until I'm standing in front of him; then he looks up. He has a slight frame, but he towers at least a full head above me. He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. "My brother," I say, my heart pummeling my ribcage for more space, "turned nineteen in Fallujah. November 17, 2004." Cosby is looking over my shoulder. I turn and look and see the awning of a Dunkin' Donuts and think maybe he wants to go there, sit down, and get a cup of coffee or something. But I don't want to move.

"I've only seen him once since then," I say, "at Thanksgiving at our parents' house last year. We got really drunk, and he told me about a day when his unit was on patrol—he was on foot, in front of a truck—and an IED went off just behind him. It was hidden in a bush. The blast went through the truck's windshield and killed the driver." The light at the corner has changed, and another round of foot traffic is approaching us. "He said it looked like someone had just sliced off the front half of his body. He said he could see the inside of the back of his skull. He said it was shiny white." I am part of the obstruction now, the two of us together forcing the oncoming wave of commuters to part, briefly, as they pass us.

“After the blast, they saw someone run for a doorway up the street. My brother and another guy took off after him. They shouldered the front gate open and went in. They were supposed to wait for more people, but they didn’t.” I pause and take a huge breath. The flood of people keeps coming, brushing past us, bodies passing within inches of ours. I keep talking, yelling to be heard over the noise of traffic and feet stomping on concrete.

“His ears were ringing, and he couldn’t hear anything. He was drenched in sweat, and it was a hundred ten degrees, and all he could think about was finding that guy. They cleared one room, nothing. They cleared a second room, nothing. Then the two of them burst into the last room. My brother said he was pumped with so much adrenaline that he couldn’t even feel where a piece of shrapnel from the truck had torn off one of his earlobes and cut his face. They burst into the room, and,”—Cosby is rapt—“and there’s the guy, sitting cross-legged on the floor on a little tiki mat thing in the middle of the room. He was just sitting there, staring at them.” A shoulder knocks against me, but I don’t move, and neither does Cosby.

“He was carrying an M4, my brother, and he put the barrel of it in the guy’s mouth. He just wanted to get a reaction. He wanted to get the guy talking, or yelling, or crying, or anything. But the guy just sat there, looking up at him. His eyes were green.”

“My brother said that’s what did it, that was it, when he noticed the color of the guy’s eyes—and how calm he was, even with the gun in his mouth.” A woman in a thick gray hat walking past hears me say this, *the gun in his mouth*, and her head turns, her eyes like a terrier’s, wide and excited. She slows but walks on.

I turn back to Cosby. “He said all the adrenaline just drained out of him, and suddenly he was exhausted, and his ear was killing him, and the idea of having to PUC that guy back to the convoy was just completely overwhelming.”

“He was just so tired—that’s how he said it. He was just so tired. So he shot him. Just the slightest of movements, pulling the trigger, and a round burst out the back of the guy’s head.” The sun is too low now for even the tallest buildings to catch its light. “Just like that.” Suddenly it’s evening, the sky over the city is overcast and dark, and the flock of commuters has passed, but I’m still yelling. “He said the blood didn’t bother him at all.” I say this to Cosby, and Cosby nods. I say it again. “It didn’t bother him at all.”

And then I stop talking. I just stand there and exhale long and hard, exhausted by everything. Cosby doesn't say anything, doesn't fidget, doesn't do anything. He just stands there towering over me, his face blank. Finally I ask if he finished his poem for the day, and he puts his notebook in my hand. The top half of the page is filled with scrawl, barely legible, a lot of it crossed out.

I find the haiku du jour toward the bottom, a circle scribbled around it. I read it to myself, shivering, the air suddenly frigid.

Girl on tracks, dead, the
living are irked, a two block
hike to the next stop.

I close the notebook and hand it back to him. The cover is green and says the pages are thirty percent recycled paper.

"What do you think?" he asks.

I mouth the last line to myself. "I think you got the syllables right."

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He looks at the ground, looks up, looks at me. He opens his mouth to say something, but I speak first. "It was nice meeting you, Cosby." I reach out, and we shake hands. Then I turn and walk as quickly as I can away from him.

I suspect he'll stand there for another minute, in the crimson lamp-lit gloom, thoughts aflutter, all the wheels in his head spinning. I imagine him standing there, wondering all kinds of things.

With this limp, I have a good sense for when people are watching me, and though I never look back, I know he's tracking me as I cross the street, turn left, pass beneath a scaffold, and sink into a crowd of passersby, where he loses me. I move swiftly amid the tired, commuting bodies, our bellies empty and aching. Together we'll hump the two blocks to the next train stop.