

L Train to Never Land

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"You see things in life and you're bit surprised what you see"

Back and Forth

I pull a somber wool coat over sore shoulders with pathetic determination and walk the length of the corridor trailing my idle hand across the wall for guidance. I optical scan my way into the elevator bank. I wonder passively, as I have on many long evenings, why there are no biometrics to enter the building only to get out. The elevator doors open the instant I hit the glowing button. I enter, the doors shut abruptly and the elevator car rises. Not the direction I'm heading. As if in response to my cursing, the elevator pauses two floors up and then descends reopening on my floor of origin.

I have been through this peculiar late night ritual before. A dance with the spirits of the mighty high rise before I bid it adieu. I step through the elevator doors, turn a complete 360° and reenter the car backwards. The doors again close but gently this time and the car descends. I amuse myself by playing fun house mirror in the reflection of the silver doors - twisting and turning slowly until I've mutated myself into a buxom Swedish swimsuit model. On the 15th floor a dwarfish gray attorney enters and fixes his eyes on my boisterous, mirror augmented bosoms. I try to flit my eyes and toss my hair with mock disdain but in doing so I shift the image in the mirror doors and am further mutated into a twisted middle aged man with a giant ass and long neck. The lawyer gasps and his eyes dart away toward a dark corner of the elevator. As we enter the lobby he rudely shoves me aside and hurries off.

In the grand lobby the security staff has again done wonders with the carpet mats and velvet ropes. They insist each day in created a new labyrinth from velvet cord, each more confounding then the one before. It takes me at least ten minutes and almost another trip in the elevator to find the exit. I push through the

revolving door, leaving the soft chamber music and haunting echoes of solitary footsteps for the rush and chill of Manhattan's crisp December evening.

The rush of night's city carries away the remnants of another 16 hour work day. It had been almost uneventful. Though my crotchless dress slacks had been quite a hit as I let some of the partners' secretaries ride me around like a wild bronco. They made beasts of themselves while treating me like an animal, taking turns slapping my bare ass with rulers and legal pads while giving me the spurs in the ribs with great fervor. Its strange how office decorum occasionally falls away into jovial anarchic moments around the holidays.

Eye for an Eye

I pause for a moment at the curb, reach deep into my shoulder bag and take out my headphones, wrap them around my head and sit them snugly over my ears. Scrolling through the long index of play lists I find the album I'm looking for *Unkle, Never Never Land*. This album like a the appearance of a long forgotten friend in peculiar dream, had been running its whispered lyrics through my head all day and I am glad to find that its still loaded on my audio player. I turn the corner and look right, deep into time square my exhausted eyes begin to sting and burn. After a lengthy string of hours in my windowless office being abused by monitor glare and hostile old newsprint my eyes do not stand a chance against the astronomical mega-candle force of The Square's mutant advertising predators. In anger I toss a discarded Snapple bottle at a giant neon tampon ad, but only manage to get it to flicker slightly before it regains its oppressively hygienic glow. Discouraged I make quick steps for the subway. *Run, run, run* Nothing could be more embarrassing then getting picked up by the lifestyle police for the attempted vandalism of a gigantic feminine hygiene implement so I best not loiter about.

Two blocks up and two block over and down into the subway. Down the well worn stairs, into the underground, toward darkness and away from the neon glow of the city above. I expect warmth but there is none. The chill of a December

night has snuck below ground attached to the corners of my clothing. I swat at my sleeves and shoulders as if trying to brush away snow or so much dandruff but the cold holds tight and with an exaggerated shiver and a moment of hand wringing I give in and duck into the turn style.

More biometrics at the turn style I swipe my universal ID card and then insert my finger into the small slot for verification. A long thin needle abruptly pricks my finger with all the compassion of a sewing machine. I know what you're thinking, pricked by needles in the subway, not very sanitary. But each needle is fresh and the chamber constantly sterilized. In fact when the program was first introduced the machines dispensed your needle to you after verification in an effort to convince people it was all right. However between all the mischievous youths and perverts pricking strangers on crowded trains and the fact that the platforms were littered with irresponsibly cast off bloody needles this PR move was quickly abandoned.

The verification process takes less time than the above disorganized explanation. I'm through the turnstile and onto the platform just in time to see the faint glow of the train disappear into the tunnel. At this time of night missing a train is bad news. I strut with aimless conviction down the platform to my chosen location 2/3 of its length. I don't smoke cigarettes but waiting always makes me wish I did. Waiting in the cold increases this wish, an excuse to light things on fire and maybe scare the prickly cold from my person would be nice. I'm not going to get into the huge fines and humiliation that would instantly befall me if I lit a smoke inside a train station, or anywhere for that matter, but this just goads the teenage rebel in me even further. I rummage through my bag in an attempt to amuse myself but find nothing but several magazines I've already exhausted and a very respectable collection of dead batteries.

I'm no longer the only one on the platform. Other victim's of late Tuesday night are struggling to carry their sorry flesh sacks along, yearning for a warm shower and a clean bed. They all remain suspiciously down the far end of the platform. I

glance to the right, away from the slowly forming pack of fellow late night travelers. All that is to be found in this direction is a forward leaning mass of hastily assembled cast off coats and blankets that I assume contains a person. Its lack of motion leads me to the belief that the inhabitant of the coat and blanket mass is unconscious. With the obvious exception of the inevitable stench of old unwashed clothing the concept of a cloak cocoon is actually appealing at the moment. Not that I would want to live out in the elements at this time of year, but as I stamp my feet in yet another feeble attempt to shake the cold from my trousers the urge to curl up in a lost corner of the station and sleep seems almost sensible though some fore-knowledge reminds me that I am mistaken.

A little embarrassed at my train of thought, I recall my gaze to a default setting, staring down at my own shoes. The tile under my feet is of a peculiar construction. Though it is cut into large tile sections arranged at an odd angle, each tile consists of pressed fragments of white/gray/black tile, as if each were constructed from the cast off detritus from a colorblind mosaic artist's masterwork. The surface is not quite smooth and the subtle textures catch the odd bits of light. Upon further investigation it appears that the tile bits are not static either. They are slowly moving about within the space of the larger tile section. Moving as if they are trying to form some sort of image, which after some minutes they do. It is apparent that many different sizes and shapes have aligned themselves into the skeletal structure of a small reptilian creature. Which, once close to fully formed, begins to move on its own. It writhes up in slow difficult movements and begins to emerge from the single dimension of the tile and out toward my feet.

I take a quick step back for fear it may have a hunger for shoe leather or worse human digits. But as I am focused on this odd little creature and its play for freedom, out of the corner of my eye I notice that a second very similar creature is forming from the ether in the far corner of the same tile section. The original creature appears as if to follow my gaze and also discovers this new creature. It immediately turns its attention away from the quest for freedom and to this new

being which is already making its way across the constantly moving tile towards the first little guy who I have fortuitously decided to name Cane. They meet in what appears to be the perfect mathematical center of the square tile space and begin to circle each other with suspicion. At this moment, as is often the case on nature programs and in college bars, it is impossible to guess whether their intention is love or violence and the moment is markedly tense with my anticipation.

It is only a few short moments before Cane lunges toward the creature from here on known as Abel. With a savage thrashing of his head, he rips into a section of Abel's tile fragment body sending small slivers of bright red tile, which I had not noticed before, scattering about the platform. What follows is a vicious and violent battle that only comes to an end when both creatures have been torn apart and can no longer be distinguished from the myriad of ceramic specs that make up the floor piece. A moments pause and then each creature (or are these now new creatures?) begin to reform only to attack each other again. After three cycles of this, I realize that the bizarre spectacle is caught in some sort of vicious loop and my interest wanders. I become again impatient.

In a State

I walk forward to the end of the platform making double sure not to step on any shoe leather eating skeletal reptiles that may be emerging from the floor tile. It has now been a ridiculous amount of time between trains, even for the early morning hour. I tap my foot and stare down into the darkness of the tunnel, knowing full well that I will see nothing. I know that I will hear the train first, that I will feel its presence on the stale breeze before I can get a glimpse of its headlights in the blackness. But, I compulsively tap and glance because that is simply what one does when one waits for a train as if the impatience is what summons the roaring silver beast from its slumber not a rigidly detailed chart of times and an immense network of colored signal lights.

I glance down into the opposite tunnel. The train is not coming in this direction but staring into the darkness in this direction is doing me the same amount of good. A few deliberate turns of the head, a few more impatient taps of the foot and I've exhausted this course of action. As I turn my head for what I have decided is the last time I can't help but notice that the platform edge and the big yellow safety line are seemingly parallel to the lines of odd tile on the platform. I step back in an odd transfixed state, these lines are running parallel to the wall behind me and the pipes that run on the ceiling above the tracks and all the strange orange bricks on the wall. The entire situation suddenly confuses my equilibrium and I almost lose my balance.

It is not simply that all the lines in the station are running parallel. That, I suppose, would not be that bizarre, but they are all in near mathematical precision. Seemingly existing in perfectly measurable distances from each other. But further inspection gives the viewer the feeling, more than the actual proof, that all these lines are minutely off, that they are all moving in toward each other in an almost immeasurable way, with the intention of meeting at the fixed yet imaginary point of horizon somewhere down the long dark train tunnel.

Safe in Mind

Transfixed, I step backwards with nimble caution until my back comes to rest against the brick wall. I turn my head to each side watching the pristine lines of the brickwork extend out from just below my shoulders. In front of me the succession of nearly parallel lines extends forward: the lines of each row of tile; the yellow safety lines at the edge of the platform; the sudden edge of the platform itself. It continues to each train rail and up the tiered wall across from the platform. Each line is perfectly measured in appearance but hinting at a subtle incongruity, at a desire for deviation that would go unseen to the casual eye. The more I stare the more glaring the angles at which these lines extend becomes. Right before my eyes they move apart, the angles at which they run become more and more obtuse. It is as if they are being pulled by unseen forces

into the distance. Each line is now no longer a one dimensional thing, no longer simply the place where one thing ends and another begins, they are now tangible pieces of cord and I can tell that each is being pulled more and more taught. The tension in each of these cords is tangibly building. I can feel the tension deep within myself as a subtle hum moves through the wall I am leaning against.

The train station is expanding in all directions as the lines and angles which define it spread out. But the tension from each line/cord is so great that it makes me claustrophobic and the hum of these different tight strings is upsetting my internal equilibrium. I step forward away from the wall and toward the tracks edge. I glance sideways in the direction at the people gathered at the far end of the platform. I am not alone. They all know something is going on but have no idea what. Each person is looking about in confusion investigating odd corners of the station in search of the peculiar feeling which has overtaken them and the station as a whole.

To be entirely honest I have experienced this sort of thing before, in long deserted hallways, or poorly designed lecture halls. By my estimation it is simply something that structures do, especially ones not designed for long term habitation. It is a stress and release ritual that these peculiarly long narrow structures partake in to maintain the soundness of their design. It is only at odd angles, in off states of mind, in situations of prolonged boredom and impatience that humans recognize this straining of the geometry and witness its eventual release. Which I now realize is coming soon.

Simultaneous to my realization I feel the warm breeze on my cheek. I smell the stale scent of ancient urine and burning metal. I hear the faint rumble from deep within the ground and then the faint glow from around a now visible bend in the tunnel. The moment stands still, though the train moves into sight, on my headphones there is the tangible moment of silence just before Manny hits the bass string with all his might. I breathe in deep and brace myself against the coming chaos, and then everything is swept up in a moment of exaltation and

terror. Manny slaps his bass with chest caving authority and the drums follow his lead. The train rushes into the station and triggers the release of every taught line and obscene angle in the place. People are thrown about as if a sizable earthquake has hit. I am reeling backwards away from the platform trying to keep my balance and not fall onto the track. The train growls and squeals to a halt and I lean forward planting my hand on the cool steel next to the door. Everything still hums around me and my insides churn from the vicious attack on my equilibrium. I steady myself while hunched slightly forward, hand still against the train for balance. The conductors off kilter chime rings out and the door opens. I take one step into the brightly lit train and my mouth is forced wide open as my body shakes with a violent retching and hundreds of iridescently purple, blue and red moths are expelled from my body immediately filling the train car with a rush of blinding color.

I Need Something Stronger

I spin around in a surprisingly smooth motion and rush into the next car. Quickly heading up to the far end with a combination of confidence and nonchalance that I hope will divert suspicion that the train car full of brightly colored insects is my fault. I slide deliberately into a single seat tucked away in the corner of the subway car. Dragging my sleeve across my quivering lips, I close my eyes steady my breathing and feel the cold sweat on my forehead dry in the cool recycled air. I lean forward over my knees, not wanting to look up for fear that several dozen accusative eyes are fixed on me.

What Are You to Me?

When I do get the nerve to lift my head and glance up the half empty car I am relieved to be greeted only with the vacant stares of weary late night travelers. My fellow commuters are spread out in a thin pattern of solitude about the train. Not one individual has company. We are all alone and dead silent trying our best to score intrusive glances at each other while avoiding eye contact. It strikes me

how desperately aged everyone looks. This is not simply an arithmetic conclusion. Several riders are younger than I am. However, since this is a downtown train after 2:00 a.m. it is safe to assume that nearly everyone is either coming from a dead end job or even worse is trying to wake up while on their way to some soul destroying graveyard shift type situation.

Panic Attack

These observations fill me with existential dread. Am I simply another vacant late night/early morning commuter? Like my fellow travelers, have I begun to wear the cold hollowness of my soul in my hunched posture and weary countenance? My muscles tense all at once. I attempt to straighten my back and raise my head but the pose feels horribly unfamiliar. I run my hand desperately across my face and feel the cold leather texture of my skin and the sore swollen tissue around my eye sockets. As I my hand descends to the bristly stubble on my chin, I begin to compulsively rub at it with frightening determination in an effort to rub my skin clean and bring life and youth to my gray complexion.

Invasion

By the time my stop finally arrives I have pulled my legs up onto the seat and tucked them into my chest wrapping my arms around them in a desperate act of self affection. As the train slows to a stop, I uncoil my limbs and stand up shakily. I Survey the train's inhabitants with a hard glance before departing. My insecurity gives way to disdain and defiance. "I refuse to let this world bring me down. I will not be like you. I will not surrender my joy, not to anyone. I will dance until the sun rises again, and it will rise brothers and sisters. It will rise" I orate in a deep impassioned tone that surprises even me. The train door opens and as a militant act of defiance I leap like a graceful ballerina out of the train, spin twice on one foot with my hands arched in revelry high above my head, then brake into a little soft shoe routine my body remembers from a high school drama production and finally leap high into the air clicking me heels like Dorothy herself and dart down

the stairs toward my connection with only a fleeting glimpse of the dumb struck passengers staring bleary eyed out from within the departing train.

Reign

With my new found energy I take the stairs three at a time. I can hear the train rushing into the station and simple vault the railing on the next set of stairs landing with a great crack of my shoes on the cement platform and dive between the closing doors. As I feel the doors close behind me and the train start to move I realize that everyone on the train has erupted in great applause. Initially I assume the ovation is for me and my delightful dance routine. However, just as I am about to bow deeply and except the praise I realize that everyone is looking away from me to the far end of our particular car. Curious to see who has stolen my spotlight I crane my neck around a couple standing near me. I can make out a man playing the recorder who is an honest to goodness snake charmer. In front of the man, who it must be said has excellent balance to remain standing while the train is in motion and not miss a note on the recorder, is a large basket and from it are rising two of the largest, most magnificent cobras I have ever seen. The rapidly oscillating notes of the recorder fill my ears to overflowing and I understand how the snakes are charmed. In fact while the snakes rise higher and higher out of the basket and move in a languid side ways motion, many of the passengers get up from their seats and begin to dance about the train. This is a marked difference from the previous crew of weary pilgrims. This is a train full of late night revelers who know no difference between night and day nor weekday and weekend. Tuesday is as good a day for dancing and intoxication as any. By the time we make our last stop in Manhattan the entire train is dancing, singing and throwing there hands in the air with abandon.

Only a few joyful moments later, my final destination arrives and I reluctantly disembark as the revelers of the L train continue on deeper into Brooklyn. I consider for a moment staying on and riding out to Canarsie, but in truth my travel home has been long and I desire the stern comfort of my own humble apartment.

I climb up from underground depths and emerge into the stillness of a blue-black Brooklyn night.

Glow

The blocks between the station and home are without street lights. The tiny glimmers of hallway lights peek through windows and cut the glossy black of night into thick slabs of darkness layered upon one another at odd angles. I eye up a long sleek piece of ebony night that begins about shoulder high and slowly descends for over a block. I get a running start and jump high into the air. I suck my legs up, turn sideways and put my hands out for balance as my feet make contact with the slippery gloss of darkness and slide smoothly forward. I lean back and straighten up a bit gaining speed as the gravity pulls me forward along the slab of refractive light. The trick is to leap from one descending streak of night with enough speed to then be able to ascend another that slopes in the opposite direction and then switch again onto another and so on until you reach your destination. It is a difficult skill to acquire but I have been practicing for years and it is not long before this magick blackness deposits me safely at my front door.

I fidget with the ID card and the magnetic reader that is constantly on the fritz. My building is in no way posh enough for biometrics on the front door. Stumbling into the dimly lit lobby, I check my mailbox as a matter of habit. After typing in the proper code the tiny door slide open and inside sits a solitary postcard. I tilt my head to on side in curiosity, letting my mind create a list of fantastic addressees for the bit of mail. Eventually, I give in and reach for it. On its face is a very bronze, muscular gentleman wearing his sun bleached hair long and very little else. He is standing on a beach holding a surfboard, with the obligatory "Wish You Were Here" emblazoned across the image just below the bulging skimpiness of his thong. I am further intrigued. I flip the card over and it reads thusly:

Dear Kelcey:

I have noticed that since you moved in you have received very little mail and none of it personal. I thought you would enjoy a little friendly correspondence. We should get a drink sometime.

Yours fondly,

Buzz "The Mailman"

Walking up the ghastly number of stairs to my apartment, a strange series of emotions begins to run with the peculiar postcard as its catalyst. Initially I feel pretty pathetic that my mailman is taking pity on me and the sorry state of my social life, then I am shocked that my mailman is blatantly hitting on me using his position of authority at the postal service and lastly I stop dead on the stairs for a moment when I realize that never in my months living here have I seen, either in the building or the street, a mailman. How does this man know who I am? What gave him the idea I was gay? Has he been watching me from afar?

Inside

It would seem that in all likelihood my mailman is stalking me, and though this will make for interesting cocktail conversation it does not yield feelings of safety or privacy. But I am weary now and, with some effort, I will my legs to climb the few remaining stairs. I soon arrive at both my front door and the decision to give this "Buzz, The Mailman" issue more sensible scrutiny in the sober light of morning. I place my ID card in the slot knowing full well that the chain lock is latched. I then proceed through a series of 23 knocks varying in volume and duration of pauses, until my cat undoes the latch and lets me into the house. Calliope, my cat, is pretty paranoid for reasons she will not reveal, which is why I am not going to tell her anything about the "Buzz" situation until I have all the facts. She insisted on the very complicated knock as soon as I brought her home from the pound, which was very difficult to learn since she has no fists with which to demonstrate. I

simply had to keep knocking in different patterns until she gave me the nod of approval.

She is, as is often the case, pissed off at me for working so late and with a viciously cutting meow turns her back on me and walks into the other room. As I hang up my jacket I call into the living room asking if she would like a drink. I get a quick triple meww in return which I know means she would and fill the cocktail shaker with ice. With a quick series of pours, shake, and strains my cocktail alchemy is complete and I walk off to the living room with two ice cold pomegranate martinis. I sit the one on the arm of the reclining chair. Calliope puts both front paws up on the chair arm and laps tentatively at the martini, pauses for a moment and then lets out a stifled whimper that I have come to understand as a harsh appraisal of my heavy hand with the pomegranate juice. I shrug and sink into the black leather couch. I take a deep sip of the dark red liquid and let my head recline back until I can stare blankly into the ceiling fan. I manage another sip at this reclined posture without spilling it all over myself and sit the cocktail down on the coffee table. Staring up at the hypnotically rotating blades of the fan, I hear the soft voice of Richard File move into the room in a low purple fog. my heavy eyelids close, the warmth of the vodka spreads through my limbs and I drift off toward sleep and beyond that a new dawn.