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HELPLESS

JUST LIKE EVERY other day I arrive at Parliament Station fifteen minutes before my train to work arrives. I buy my ticket and sit down at the same end of the same waiting seat I occupy every day. All around me are familiar sights; the unevenly cut edge of the concrete platform and the rust spots that have slowly expanded onto the side of the tracks. I arrive early because this is my time of peace; the preserver of my sanity. The clock's illuminated numbers show 6.03. I lean back and breathe deeply of the crisp, underground air. It will only be half an hour or so before my morning sanctuary is unremorsefully invaded by the quick steps and short tempers of the city rush; but that's why I come here. It is as if the platform is actively savouring the few hours of peace it receives before it is ungraciously trampled once again; the calm before its daily storm. I come to share that peaceful sensation with it. There are a few other people around, but they too respect the silence.

The air is slowly invaded by a quiet rumbling; it steadily grows louder and more dramatic. The mounting ringing in my ears sounds as though something will surely explode. It's the express train. It won't stop at this station. Every day two of these go by before my train arrives. I jump up and brace myself. This is my favourite part of the day. The ever growing sounds tell me that the train is about to shoot through the tunnel entrance. The front of the train compacts the tunnel air in front of it so that just seconds before it comes through an explosion of suppressed air gushes out onto the platform. I close my eyes and raise my arms as the powerful crisp wind tears through my hair and thrusts my clothes firmly against my body. The exhilaration stains my face with a joyful smile. My ears are deafened as the train rushes by me at a deadly pace. Then silence. I sit back down. Overjoyed and rejuvenated I close my eyes; impatient for the next express train to come through.

'Er, excuse me buddy.' I hear a rough drawn out voice above me. I slowly exhale and open my eyes. Standing above me is a mid-thirties man. He has long, rough and uneven brown hair. He is wearing no shoes. The knees in his pants are torn and half of the buttons on his dirty shirt are missing. His stench is overpowering. The permanent dirt marks staining his face and hands prompt me to wonder how many weeks it has been since his last wash. He is rubbing his open palms together; shaking and rocking back and forth. His body is hunched over, angled slightly away. He is looking at the ground, rather than at me. It is as if he is scared to be talking to me. Frustrated by his unorthodox interruption, I look up at him to signify I am listening.

'You . . . ah . . . ' A moment passes and he quickly scratches the back of his neck. 'You couldn't spare some change could ya?' He blurts out nervously. Hardly in the mood for charity, I quickly decide it will be easier to brush him off than to give him the three or four dollars of change in my back pocket, and risk the chance of conversation.

'Sorry mate,' I smile empathetically, 'all out.' He stands for a moment longer then glances down at me. I see a tear breaking in his eye and I immediately feel guilty, but not guilty enough to do anything. He looks back down and walks away. Frustrated by the unwelcome break in my daily ritual I push the homeless man out of my mind and return to my own thoughts.

A few minutes pass then I hear the steady rumble of the oncoming express train. Once again I jump to my feet and brace myself for my favourite part of every morning. The explosion of wind blasts through the tunnel entrance and rushes through me. Then comes the train. The noise is deafening. Above the noise of the train I hear a soul crushing thud. I look up to see blood splattered along the concrete, right up to the end of the platform. Nearby a woman starts screaming. My mind and my senses go hazy. All I can comprehend is the horrifying mixture of the screaming woman and the screaming brakes.