

## Tunnel Vision

It's Wednesday. Outside on my balcony, with cellphone in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, I request an Uber to Penn Station. Burgeoning sunlight and muggy morning air produce an instant necklace of moistness around my neck, indicating I need to wear a summer dress instead of the jeans and shirt I'd laid out last night. After dressing, I stuff my knapsack with pens, pencils, notepads and a camera. My movements tacitly remind me of the burdened things I no longer do. The things devised by other's versions of who I should be and how I should act. From my parent's house to my home with my former husband, I was a willing participant in my own disappearance.

Now, with assigned roles dismissed. I don't set a bowl on the floor for four legs to surround. I don't thaw anything for dinner. I don't make the bed. Since beating cancer and divorce two years ago, I take this day of the week to breathe inside the swoop of a bird in flight, where I can solely reside in the rhythm of my own heartbeat.

Cool air, soft leather seats and smooth jazz on the radio ensures I will give the driver an A+ rating. Our conversation is light, about the weather and the good old days. I listen more than talk, as we pass Greenmount Cemetery, on the Station North side. I am glad for the high darkened stone walls blocking the sight of what lies behind them. Disintegrating bones buried under levels of dirt and grass are not unlike the encumbering things in my life I have paved over and aim to keep in dormancy. Meditation, volunteering at the mission and my Wednesdays keep bitterness from consuming me. I am survivor and as such I am compelled to live in the now.

The driver maneuvers around the gigantic Baltimore City landmark, Brodsky's male/female sculpture fused by blood red heart, to the front doors of the station. I smile. He smiles. We wish each other a good day. Simple. Easy. Bloodless.

Rush hour is over. Dangling briefcases, tailored suits, clicking high heels have gone to their nine to five jobs in DC. I used to be one of them, always running to catch something that was always fleeting. At fifty-six years old, none of the trappings of an uninspired, robotic life appeal to me. No more beauty salon hair styles, only my natural graying locs. No make-up, leaving a light splattering of freckles to play across the bridge of my nose. No push-up bras or spanx to lift what gravity has seen to fit to pull from their once upward trajectory.

I saunter over to the ticket line in sync with the slowed pace of the almost empty station. The line is short. I shift my backpack to accommodate the wait. Feeling it's even distribution across my back, reminds me of how grateful I am, at no longer being chained to the gritty stories I was assigned at the newspaper, where death and/or disillusionment were invariably in every one of my bylines. As a freelance writer and novelist, I write science fiction, where I create worlds and characters that embody my quest to further identify the fallacies of this world. The ones that make a child think come-true-wishes, happy-ending-fairy tales, are sustainable realities. They simply destroy us year by year in our quest for an elusive happiness in the arms of others, instead of attaining it inside of our own developed sense of self.

A man wearing a cowboy hat asks me, with a nasally twang, if this is the line to buy tickets. After I say yes, he insipidly talks about returning home to Colorado and how beautiful it is there. I imagine him on a farm with a wife washing clothes at the same time she is holding a baby, then feeds the other children and does ten thousand other things that will surely lead to an early death by burden. I quickly move, when the man in the ticket booth says, "Next in line".

My tolerance for the mundane began to wane when the lump they cut from my breast laid on a shiny silver tray. I stared at it through the haze of waning anesthesia. Blood was quickly drying around it. There was no pulsation. It, this piece of me, formed from the toxicities of a life, I had allowed to build up, was no longer receiving my essence. The later declaration that the cancer had been plucked out, before it spread, left me with an immediate need to rid myself of all things sucking away a life I hadn't claimed. I went from the doctor's office to the lawyer's office. A few months later, after a bitter dispute with my husband over my selfishness and ingratitude, I signed my divorce papers.

"The 440 Marc train to Washington, DC is now boarding at gate 10," blares the disembodied voice stirring movement through the corridors.

Loud cellphone conversations accompany me on my walk to the exit door. A man pleading for his wife to let him come home. A woman barking orders at some underling at work because a project is late. Nothing of an exceptional nature. Just the incessant drone of the unenlightened.

When I enter the "no cell phone" car of the train, the temperature goes from desert heat to the Arctic tundra. The air conditioning is on full blast, as I suspected it would be, so before I sit down, I pull out a sweater, then grab my laptop. After a week of revisions and a looming due date for my third book, I seek quiet delights, as well as, inspiration for a short piece on being a survivor of cancer for a local magazine. As I wait for the smooth progression of the train from the platform into the sunlight, I type, "It is the journey that is important and not the destination", then type, "totally overused cliché".

Nearing the end of the final underpass out of the station, advancing daylight creates undulations of darkness and light in the tunnel. In a flash of the later, a hand waves at me from

inside of an arched hollow in the tunnel wall. I push my face against the window and strain my neck to look back, as the train moves slightly faster. A turn of a head and a shifting body give proof to what my eyes have seen.

By the time the train reaches the West Baltimore stop, I decide to get off the train. I walk out to the platform and see the conductor, who earlier took my ticket.

“Excuse me. I saw a person inside of a wall in the tunnel,” I say. Her dull look cues me to go on. “Perhaps the person is hurt or soon will be, being so close to the tracks”.

“I will report it, ma’am.”

Her reply is given without eye contact accompanied with an unbothered tone full of “whatever” attitude. She walks back inside the train without a backwards glance.

I go to the other side to catch the train back to Baltimore. When the train arrives, I board and wait for the conductor to ask for my ticket, knowing I will need to purchase one.

“Ticket, please,” asks the conductor with a smile.

“I need to pull out my money to buy a ticket.”

I burrow through my knapsack and pull out my wallet careful to let my old press badge fall out. Handing him the money, I tell him about the person in the tunnel. He takes my money, gives me a receipt and then gets on his cellphone to tell whomever he was speaking with that a person was sighted near the tracks at Penn Station on the Southbound side.

Sitting on the train, I note I haven’t seen one bird and that I am probably going to miss my Wednesday. When I ask myself why am I going back, I have no ready answer. I tell myself maybe it’s because of the people I help serve food to at the mission. Although, I don’t personally get involved with them, I watch them and intently listen to their conversations, not because I feel sorry for them, but because I’m a writer, which leads to my second possible reason, once a

reporter, always a reporter. Still, an intuitiveness lurks somewhere within me, as I end my musings with the word fate.

I arrive, about twenty minutes later to see a security guard pushing a wheelchair along the platform. A seated figure, draped in colorful mismatched clothes, sits placidly with hands folded over her lap. The guard stops outside of a black door that reads, "Personnel only". He parks the wheelchair and opens the door.

"Excuse me. I am the person who called in about seeing someone in the tunnel."

"Yes, ma'am. We got her. "Bout to call the police now".

"Why the police? Why not the hospital?"

"The police can determine what to do with her. I did my part and got her off the tracks. Now, we gotta make sure she stays out of there," he says before going through the door.

"Hello. My name is Malene. Are you alright?" I say, stooping down to her eye level.

"I'm always alright," she says in a voice like an ocean breeze cooling sun soaked skin.

A checklist runs through my head, when peering at her smudged face, chapped lips and penetrating brown eyes. Mental illness. Job loss. Death of a spouse. A war veteran. In the middle of my guessing gyrations, a sudden tinge of pride pricks me, I am grateful my trials haven't marooned me in the darkness.

"Why were you in the tunnel?"

"Resting."

"That's a dangerous place to rest."

"The world is a dangerous place. That's why we're here, right? To help make it better."

"Don't you have a home?"

"I did once upon a time, like fairy tales begin, but it ended as fairy tales do.

“This doesn’t seem like a happy ending to me. How did you lose your way? Was it drugs or alcohol or an abusive partner? Lost your job?”

“Are you alone in the world?”

The more I ask, the less I get and the more bizarre the less is. I almost feel as if I’m inside one my novels.

Silence replaces my barrage of questions, when she looks up at a flying bird. She reminds me of a Madonna, as the sunlight arcs the black scarf wrapped around her head. I watch her eyes ride the bird’s every dive and soar. The momentary distraction ends when she says, “Are you alone?”

“I am, and I love it,” I say.

“Do you really love it?” She says.

And then it happens. The bird circles lower and lower until it rests on the back of her hand. I listen as she coo’s in unison with the flutter of the bird’s wings, lightly brushing across her crinkled, worn skin. My awe renders me speechless, so I listen, and my listening opens me to the sound of the train horn, distant, but comforting; the shuffle of feet boarding the next train, demanding, but alive; the words flowing from the mouth of the woman, hushed, but resonating inside of me. It is as if I am a character in one of my books, caught up in the sage wisdom of a wizard.

In the short time of her speaking to the bird and me, a forgotten warmth spreads inside of me. A melting of the mental macadam I have laid to suppress everything, except my victories. She touches my hand, as she encourages the bird to fly off with the gentle shake of her other hand. The bird loops around us seven times, before it disappears into the sky. I remember, from my research, that seven is a magical number.

The guard emerges to push her away. She releases my hand. At once I have a sense of being empty and full at the same time.

I ask to take her picture. She agrees. I snap two shots, before they move towards the station. Almost to the entrance door, the old woman turns back and says, “Shake the cold from your bones. Life is for living not just surviving. Dance with wolves. Husky your voice from howling at the moon on starlight nights. Then share the rhythm of your song.”

I look at the pictures as she rolls away. Damn! I hit the swap button on my cellphone in my haste and now have two fragmented pictures of myself. I start to call out to her, and then realize, I never asked her name.