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Down in the Station

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"The Lone Tenement," oil on canvas, by George Bellows, 1909.

by Seth Sawyers

She was sure it was our sixth date but I said, no, it was only our fifth as we took the steps down into the 28th Street station. Even the screeching of the train cars

sounded like it was music just for us, singing: nothing can go wrong, not now, not as long as your ears are hearing this. We were on our way to a museum, one of the small ones, a strange one, and I can't, no matter how hard I try, remember which. The trip to New York was my idea. She had red-blond hair and I had wanted to see how it would look against her black wool coat with all those buildings in the background. When I said I'd found a cheap, clean hotel in the twenties, I thought she'd chipped my front teeth the way she jumped on me and kissed me so hard. She had pale cheeks that I had hoped would turn red in the cold up there, and they did.

In the station a black woman with thick braids played the cello. I thought she was good, but I don't know if she really was good, because what do I know about the cello? I pointedly did not say anything about the cello player to prove to myself, and to the girl with the pale cheeks, that I was so used to the subway that the cello-playing woman hadn't affected me. I was trying to play it cool. Laura was the girl's name.

I was in the middle of noticing but at the same time not commenting on the cello when the screeching from the train approaching the 28th Street station grew. We had heard it before, if only a few times. I suppose it was another of the many little things that happen in New York which is familiar if you live there but not if you're just visiting. Laura grabbed my arm and pulled herself close. That sudden warmth made me think: oh, this is something. I wanted to fall down that endless warm passageway for which I've yearned so long but the screeching turned into a sound I had not heard before and the feeling of her hand on my arm went away.

It happened fast, as they say these things do. There was a quick shout, and then silence and a bright-blue blur. The man was wearing a jacket, a bright-blue jacket you'd wear to go running, or maybe it was a raincoat, though it hadn't been raining. That blue color was flying, and then, through the screeching, there was a hollow thump. And though I've thought about it so many times since, and I can't figure out why, the cello kept going.

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It's tough, trying to remember, like remembering what it was like before you got the flu when you're aching and hot all over. It had been either our sixth date or our fifth and after we got off the bus in New York we sat on a bench and ate slices of pizza and then drank wine in a dark basement place. I never drink wine, but this girl made drinking wine seem like something I might eventually like. Back in the tiny hotel room that had been made to look like the inside of an English pub, there had been no discussion. We simply took off each other's clothes. There was laughing. And slowness, and then it got faster and faster still and she told me to slow down and when I did I saw that of course she was right and we did that for a long time,

for as long as we could, for as long as I could. Afterwards, I noticed her cheeks had flushed. Just before I went in to kiss her forehead, she closed her eyes, and her eyelids reminded me of milky, spotless moons.

She wriggled free of my arms and legs and put on some of her clothes and some of my clothes and left our room for the bathroom down the hall. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling. I waited. I would have done anything she wanted, for I was only a vessel, a thing, benevolent, I think, empty but willing. That's what I thought, at the time. I mean, I was still able to think that of myself.

She slid in beside me. She was smiling. I always forget that, how much she smiled. She slid in and said, "Want to know something?" I nodded and then she said, "It's not that I love you or anything, but I will say that I have moderate feelings for you." She tapped her finger on her breastbone. "In here."

I don't remember what I said next, probably because it couldn't have been as good, but I remember our weird little room, the light that went from white-blue to blue-white, an electric, humming blue that, since then, I picture when I think of New York. We fell asleep but I woke up when I felt her leaving the bed again. After she finished pulling on her high boots, she said, "Let's fucking eat," and we ate expensive hot dogs standing up in a corner place and after that we walked down the steps into the 28th Street Station, on our way to that small museum whose name has escaped me. It was just the next thing we were going to do together in a series of things that had no end.

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The man's body sort of curled around the far corner of the train's flat front. The train kept going. It didn't seem to be stopping. There was a moment where nothing at all seemed to be happening anywhere in the universe and then, suddenly, everything turned sharp and bright and jangly, as if the air had been dosed with an extra-large helping of bitter sugar. I wasn't feeling anything yet, not really. It was still too soon. But it was coming. Everything suddenly had edges that you could trace with the tip of your finger. Everything pulsed.

By the time I remembered her, she had moved several steps away and was sitting still as if she'd always been there, had been born crouching down in that station, perched on her heels, her coat enveloping her small body. I hugged her from the side, but she wasn't hugging back. Instead she was focused on claspings, over and over, each of the fingers on her left hand, pulling, as if to crack the big knuckle at the base. She kept doing this, four, five cycles of it. I couldn't believe how long she went on like that. The fingers on her left hand were turning red. I kept trying to hug her but that wasn't working. Finally, I took hold of her hands. By then, the subway workers in the bright-yellow jackets had arrived and were telling everyone to leave. "Hey," I said to her. "Hey."

She had been far away. It's so clear to me now, so simple, and expected. "Oh my god," she said. She seemed to notice me for the first time.

"Hey," I said. "Are you all right?"

I had let go of her hands and again she took one of her fingers and pulled on it before quickly moving to the next. I watched her: index finger, middle, ring, pinkie, thumb, and back around. As she started on a third time, I wrapped my hands, not gently, around hers. "Hey," I said. "Stop that now."

She turned to me, her whole body rigid, as if some important string within her had been pulled, and then she was straightening herself, standing. "You stop it," she said. "You stop it now. You stop it. You stop it."

I didn't want to repeat myself but I couldn't help it. I was trying to be comforting but I had no other words. "Hey," I said. "Come here." I wanted to hug her. I hoped that would fix things, reset things.

She looked at me then as if I were someone she did not know but suspected she would dislike. When I tried to kiss her cheek, she stiffened and turned her head away and my lips met nothing soft and giving but instead only the flat, final dryness of her hair.

The way she was looking at me was different from how she had looked at me in the hotel room. I knew, even back then, that some tender part of me, just in that terrible moment, was hardening and would maybe never be supple again.

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And all of this happened some years ago and I think of her often enough, and too often when I've had some beers at the cheap places where I meet my friends now. This past Thanksgiving, we met at a diner in the suburbs, near where she grew up. She was already in a booth, waiting, drinking hot tea. Her hair was different. She had a tan. She had gotten some work doing commercials, out in California. One was for a company that sells home-security systems. She played a scared housewife. We ate whatever we ate and talked plenty and then I walked her out to her rental car, which was for some reason a Corvette. She got into the Corvette and rolled down her window and when she did I asked if I could kiss her. We kissed for a long time. Then I walked around and got into the passenger-side seat and we kept going but it wasn't the same as when I was standing outside. After a minute, she said she had to get home, to her family. I'd met them twice, back before. I liked them. They were kind people.

"Do you ever think about that time in New York?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," she said.

I realized that I'd made a mistake, bringing it up. Her face turned. I kept going and maybe I kept going because I needed to.

"It wasn't the same after that," I said.

"No."

I should have stopped, but I didn't. "I wish I could go back and stop that man from doing what he did. Do you ever feel that way?"

Her eyes softened. "Do you really not remember?" she asked.

It was beginning to come back. I was making it come back.

"After, out on the street," she said. "You must remember."

I stared at the dashboard. It was true. I did remember.

"I wish I could just forget what you said. The way you said, you know, 'How about the cello player.'"

My stomach shrunk. Of course I remembered. But she wasn't quite right. What I'd said, and I'd said it after we'd walked ten or maybe fifteen blocks, was, "At least the cello player was good." I was trying to be funny, or cute, or coy. After that, the rest of the weekend in New York was quiet and soon it was over. And I remember holding her hand, both of us in shock for the first few blocks, and then after a few minutes it came pouring out of us, which felt natural and good. And at some point we hugged and I felt close to her again. But then she kept talking and talking about it and I can still remember that rising thing inside of me, like an electric charge in my belly slowly turned up, that urge to go back to the way it had been, and I said what I said.

Sitting in the rental car, I looked up at her. "But before that, it was nice, right?"

She smiled. I'd forgotten, again, how much I'd liked her smile. "It was," she said.

I leaned in. This time, she really kissed back, really pressed herself against me as much as she was able, took my hand and placed it on her warm waist, the wonderful soft spot between her ribs and her hip bone, that soft warm place which I had once known. That's the part that's going to stay with me. Her taking my hand like that and placing it on that spot. I just know it.

I opened that Corvette's door and stepped out. It had begun raining and had turned cold. I could see my breath. I hunched over, and looked in through the passenger-side window. She wanted to go home. I could see that. She was cold, and tired.

She'd always gotten sleepy earlier than I did. She rolled down the window. She was looking at me. I opened my mouth, but I had nothing, and so I just said, "A pleasure." That's what I said. Maybe one day I'll say something that's so true and pure, but not on that day.

She smiled a little smile. "It was nice seeing you, too," she said, and drove off across the parking lot, the Corvette's big clouds of exhaust white and milky. She eased out into the road. There were no other cars around. It was only the Corvette's metallic shininess, its bright and sleek newness. I kept waiting for her to push it, to open it up on this rental car she'd probably never drive again, to fly away from me in some kind of final roar, but instead she only drove away slowly, even using her blinker

before moving over a lane. And still, there she goes, moving farther away, and farther away, that shiny car inching away from me down that empty road, and I can still see her.



Seth Sawyers's writing has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *Salon*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Morning News*, and elsewhere. He teaches writing at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and serves as an editor at *Baltimore Review*.