

Waiting

Aimee Kidrick

“What is up, man? You seem kind of down,” inquired the dopey-looking boy, his brown hair consisting of untold amounts of curls.

The girl, her eyes vivid and mortified, did not expect someone to show up. Alone outside the old train station, she had expected no witnesses to appear, least of all this strange teenager with pink eyes.

“Who...what are you doing here?” she stuttered, her hair tangled by the wind.

The boy, his face an oddly pleasant expression, was crowned by a naïve smile. His black shirt, which was patterned with multicolored splotches, smelled like a mixture of incense, skunk, and ammonia, as did his baggy pants. Despite the persistent wind, he wore no coat, his ink-stained arms hanging limply from his sides. One hand had a loose grip on a drawing pad while the other held a joint.

“Man, bro, I don’t get what you’re doing here so late. Most of the time, the people I see here this time of night are pretty crazy,” he remarked to the joint. “They either graffiti shit, smoke shit, or do shit to each other.”

Despite the gratuitous swearing, the boy’s voice was bizarrely gentle and serene, although it also had an uneven edge to it.

“I was waiting for a train,” she said meekly. She could still remember riding with her father on an Amtrak to her grandparents’ home. The same smell of pine that lingered over the strange boy also lingered over her father frequently.

“Whoa, man, but trains don’t stop here this time of night. They just pass on by. I love seeing them go by while I sit on the benches and smoke some weed. It’s awesome shit, man,” he finished, smiling as though he were in a daydream.

All she wanted was for the pain in her head to stop. Desire of anything else was nothing to her while this mental ache of unpleasant memories and feelings continued in her brain. Many of those

unpleasant memories involved her father's oblivious and ignorant personality.

"Dad," she would ask quietly when she was younger, not even looking into his red-tinged eyes, "shouldn't we go grocery shopping?" Within the haze of weed, she would hear his reply: "Come on, Annie, don't you see? This is everything we need, right here. One whiff, and all my stresses go away. Why don't you smoke some of this miracle stuff with me? You're so pale and stressed out; you look like you really need it."

That was one of her less unpleasant memories. Many times, her father wouldn't even respond; he would only stare vacantly at her with the hint of a euphoric smile while she stared helplessly at him. Shaking her head in frustration, the girl pushed the memory out of her brain. "I need to get out of here," said Annie flatly to the boy.

"Oh, you aren't running away from problems, are you? Man, when I have problems, I kick them in the fucking teeth, but then we make up and be friends and drink some Mountain Dew together."

The boy's hair. Her father's hair. Both curly. Both brown. She could barely remember her mother, who had long, elegant black hair, far nicer than her father's nest of curls. The last time Annie had seen her was when she was 15, when she finally tired of her husband's drug addictions. Screaming obscenities at her husband, she left with only a few suitcases, refusing to take her pleading, hysterical daughter with her.

"You look just like your father," she hissed, eyeing Annie's brown locks with irritation. "You're as worthless as he is, too. You've always been such a lazy, quiet brat. Don't even try following me."

The shyness that had long afflicted Annie, the shyness that often kept her in her room reading, also kept her from retorting. But over several days, the cracks in Annie's heart slowly filled with bitter determination to prove her mother wrong.

Annie, a high school dropout furiously working as a movie theatre attendant and a waitress by the age of 17, had every cent of her money go to groceries and bills. In contrast, her father did nothing but occasionally take what money remained out of their bank account for pot. It was all he ever bought.

Three years of constant work, and Annie still felt scorn for her

mother and her harsh words. Slowly, however, that scorn was becoming sorrow; Annie crouched down in front of the boy, her lips a thin line and her eyes misty.

“Man, sister, are you crying? Come on, sit down. We can talk about it,” said the boy. “And I won’t try anything with you either! That shit is wrong, man. I’m not like those other creepers around here. Sex is supposed to be a miracle, not something that can be abused and shit.”

She could not believe the idiocy of this teenager. Despite the urge to tell him off, she only managed a few meek words.

“My dad smokes pot,” said Annie lifelessly. She had no tears left in her after her hysterical breakdown yesterday.

The boy stared at her with a frown, much like how her father had when she herself had sworn and screamed at him during her breakdown.

“Huh. You sound pretty down. I smoke pot all the time but I don’t make anyone sad like that,” he mused, despite both of his eyes nearly going in different directions.

Annie thought of her father, face still vacant and uncaring, shrugging and saying that smoking pot felt too good to stop.

“Well, what about your parents?”

“Aw, man, my parents are the best! They don’t care if I go to high school classes! They don’t care if I drive their car without a license. And oftentimes, the three of us pass pot around and have some awesome family time together.”

A faint twitch betrayed Annie’s stoic demeanor.

“Okay, then. I suppose that’s that. Goodbye, stranger.”

She walked past a poorly-painted yellow line, looking at the tracks as though they were a road to inner peace and salvation.

“Whoa, you got to wait behind the yellow line, man!”

“Shut up.” She continued walking towards the tracks, almost as though she were taking a leisurely stroll, oblivious to the boy’s widening eyes.

“But bro, those trains go down those tracks at killer speed! You don’t want to be in the way of one of those fuckers!”

The sound of running footsteps. The sensation of being pushed down. A faint sound akin to a wailing ghost.

Annie lay face-first in gravel ten feet away from the tracks, the boy

holding her down as the sound of a train whistle blew far off in the distance.

“Stay down, sister! You don’t want to play around one of those things!”

“You don’t understand. I don’t want to go back home. I don’t need to see my father again.” Despite the boy’s increasingly panicked tone of voice, Annie’s voice remained lifeless.

As the train drew closer, Annie started to fight back against the boy. The boy, whose thin frame hid a resilient strength, kept her to the ground, pinning her arms down. Despite repeatedly kicking the boy at varying points of his body, switching between the stomach, legs, and groin, he would not let go as Annie’s wail was drowned out by the steel behemoth’s passing.

His hold having loosened after the train had disappeared into the night, Annie broke free of the boy, pushing him to the ground and kneeling weakly on the tracks. The boy walked over to her, looking down at her shaking form.

“The freight train wasn’t going to stop for you, man!” said the boy. “They don’t carry people unless you’re in the caboose, and I didn’t want to see you trying to jump on that and fail.”

Annie stared at her hands, bending her fingers as though they were claws. She eyed the tracks, wondering when the next train would pass by, then felt her hands beginning to rake her face.

“Hey, there. Why are you doing that shit to yourself? Oh, mother-fuck.”

Faint traces of blood were visible on the tips of her fingernails, while equally faint lines ran down her face. Clawed nails carved themselves into her skin as an angry and painful red dulled her sight. It was too much. The jobs were too much. She didn’t want to go back to being a waitress. She had no desire to go back to her other job at the movie theatre, either. It was all hopeless.

“I didn’t actually think...I didn’t think a bro like you would be willing to do something like that to yourself,” said the boy, eyes widening in horror.

Despite the noxious smell about his clothes, Annie reluctantly let

herself be guided back towards the station by the stranger, pale red lines still visible down her face.

“Yeah, you aren’t the only one to have tried this. I’ve seen people here before try this sort of thing,” he said sadly. “I remember being here in the daytime with my friend a few years back. We were all smiling and happy and ready to go to some awesome gaming convention. It was pretty sudden when we heard a train that we knew wasn’t going to stop. She dropped her stuff, ran like fuck, and jumped right in front of it.”

For the first time, the boy seemed sincerely sad and heartbroken. He could still hear the screams of shock and confusion from that day. An image of her in mid-jump, arms reaching out as though taking a faith-filled leap, seconds before being replaced by silver and a faint blur of red, still hung in his mind.

“Found her journal later in her bedroom. Her last entry said that she was sick of her dad doing sick shit to her and didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know how else to get away from it. I don’t get it. We were going to a gaming convention. Why didn’t she just choose to never come back? Did she really think shit was hopeless? And why’d she never tell me?”

The girl looked at her hands again. Blood faded into skin.

“I come here every night now, just in case there are other bros that decide to do the same thing when no one’s around. There’ve been a few over the years; I managed to talk them out of it each time. None of them was ever a girl, though. You’re the first, bro. You’re the first since that day.”

Annie remained motionless, still feeling tense and in shock. Seen from a distance, one may have assumed that she was carved from stone. Silence hung in the air for several minutes.

“Still I mean...trains are miracles, aren’t they?” said the boy softly, fiddling with a joint. “They’re made of heavy steel and other shit, but they can reach speeds of...well, I don’t know, but they’re pretty damn fast. One day, I’m going to ride trains across the whole motherfucking country.”

Annie continued to stare at her clawed hands.

“No offense,” she managed weakly, “but why do you smoke that?”

The boy froze the joint in mid-twirl.

“It’s motherfucking relaxing. And man, I needed to motherfucking relax after my friend offed herself. I was crazy and tense all the time afterwards, before my dad offered me some of this miracle shit. I couldn’t even focus on drawing like I used to.”

He gazed cautiously at the girl, who had been in the same frozen position for several minutes.

“Hey, come on, you should sit down, man! Here, you can sit against this wall,” he said gently, watching her slowly sink to her knees against the brick wall next to his drawing pad.

“I don’t know what to do. I walked all the way here. I really wasn’t expecting anyone to be here. Did you really have to stop me?” she said with a sad gaze, all traces of any emotion in her voice now gone. Silence remained steadfast for several long minutes.

“Yeah. Eventually, things have to improve, don’t they? When my friend died, I never thought shit would get better for me. But I thought about other people that were feeling shitty like she had, and then it hit me like a sack of motherfucking bricks. Why the motherfuck should I be feeling bad for myself when there are other bros out there feeling worse? There had to be something I could do for them, right? That’s why I’m here.”

Annie’s expression suddenly went from lifeless to surprised.

“Whoa, motherfucker, did I inspire you there?” inquired the boy, his face hopeful.

“...My cell phone’s vibrating in my coat pocket.”

“Oh. Well, answer it, then!” he urged her, smiling.

The boy watched the girl pick up the phone and talk quietly to whoever was on the other end. He thought about his own struggles in the past, his own urges to kill himself in shame after his friend’s death, the comfort he found in the joint in his hand. He could still remember his friend taking pot days before her suicide. It had done nothing to save her.

For the first time, the boy eyed the joint with mild uncertainty.

“All right,” said the girl suddenly, putting the cell phone back in her coat pocket. “That was my dad.”

“Whoa, what’d he want?” asked the boy, noticing that the girl was even paler than earlier.

“He was wondering where I was,” she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. “Apparently, my mom called him earlier today. She wants to see us both in a few weeks. No idea why; my dad sounds pretty amazed, too.”

“Whoa, wait. Your parents divorced?” he asked.

“Yes. My mother was tired of my father’s pot addiction and left because he couldn’t break himself of it. My father hasn’t worked for years; I had to work two jobs to keep us from losing our house. There were so many times we got close to being unable to pay the bills. He didn’t help by using what money we had left to buy himself weed.”

Annie’s eyes were venomous, glaring straight at the boy.

“Well...” said the boy apprehensively, starting to go as pale as the girl, “at least your mom looks like she wants to get back in touch with you two motherfuckers again! See? Shit can get better—”

“My mother hated me. She thought I was lazy and irresponsible like my father just because I was shy and introverted. How do I know she still doesn’t feel that way? I don’t understand why on earth she wants to see us both after how she left us.”

The boy seemed to shrink under Annie’s bitter gaze, although the bitterness in her eyes was slowly fading into that of sadness.

“Well...uh, I mean...maybe she still thinks that shit. But, I mean, what if she changed her mind? Maybe your dad’s told her about you more. I don’t know, man! I mean, not much to do but visit her and see. I mean, at least you aren’t a motherfucking pile of limbs and blood, right? You’re still breathing and shit, so I guess it’s up to you to find out about your mom. Things can only get better, right?”

Annie did not nod or shake her head; she remained still.

“Uh...well, I can walk you back home if you want, unless you drove here. I don’t drive or any of that shit, but I don’t expect you to walk home alone or anything. Crazy shit happens at night! You were pretty motherfucking lucky to get here without anything bad happening to you.”

“...Yes, I did walk. I only live four blocks from the station,” she said, eyes still sad but her mouth now hinting a faint trace of a smile.

“Still...” he said, eyeing his joint. Quickly turning away from the girl, he swiftly put the joint out. “There can be some scary motherfuckers

around. I'll walk home with you, okay? And I don't want you to try motherfucking hurting yourself again."

"...Whatever you want," shrugged the girl, a smile now visible on her pale face.

As the girl and the boy started walking, the girl turned towards the boy with an inquiring look on her face.

"Uh, I never asked what your name was. Do you mind telling me?"

"Why the motherfuck not?" he said, laughing. "It's Dave. What about you, bro? I never got your name, either!"

"Oh. Um, it's Annie. Nice to meet you, Dave."

"Nice to meet you too, motherfucker!"