

A Minor Incident

Nobody had noticed it. The subway hummed along, without too many passengers. It was Sunday morning, and most of the passengers were probably going to the stadium, for the game later. Of course, the odd youngster would be going home from being out all night.

It was a chilly, but beautiful day in spring. On days like that you could almost forget the woes and worries that you had, and you could almost forget about the turmoil in the world. Almost. And for the 50 or so passengers on this train, reality would kick in soon enough. Time was ticking, and everybody was speeding towards something. But not what they expected.

The train had just pulled out from a station, and was gaining speed. It happened very fast. A flash of light and a loud, deafening noise. Then, darkness, and as the passengers regained their hearing, there was the screaming. Cries for help. Prayers to gods that are not listening, or not there at all. A child calling its mother, who would never answer.

Help came later. After what seemed like an eternity, but probably wasn't. The firefighters and the police and other rescue workers moved about quickly, moving about a business they had become all too expert at.

The news came on at noon, but had already been bumped down to the less important items by evening. After all, it was but a minor incident. The combination of it being Sunday morning, and some technical happenstance had made it that way.

But the child, crying for its mother: nothing in this world will ever make that a minor incident. Be it Sunday morning or not.

(Based on an exercise generated by WriteThis – 19-05-2005 14:34:20 – the story takes place underground; the most important object is not mentioned directly)

The old guy sat at a table in the back, as usual. He had finished eating, and was sipping his coffee (black, with two heaped spoonfuls of sugar. As always. Even if it made his slight diabetes act up. What the Hell – you only live once.)

The diner was emptying as the clock was going on midnight. The Greek behind the counter look tired, and was wiping the worn metal with a cloth, again and again, the same spot over and over. He was waiting for the old man to finish up and go home. So they could all call it a day. Or night, as it was.

The only good thing about the old man was his tips. They were huge, most often two or three times as much as his regular bill would add up to. They said he had made his money in some shady way, but who cares? Money is money, that's what the Greek always said.

What was keeping the old geezer? Normally, he would be out of there around eleven, being picked up by his driver, in that big, slick, black limo of his. Who knows where it would take him? Upper East or Upper West, possibly. Or out into the lush plains beyond New Jersey. Who cared? He paid, that was it.

Still, it was getting to be annoying, this. Why can't he just finish that coffee already? The Greek stopped fiddling with the cloth, and turned his attention to moving some cups and glasses around, making a lot of noise. Or some, at least. Just a sign that he was ready to close up.

Finally. Good. The Greek saw two green bills being dropped on the table in the back, and the old man left, without as much as a "Goodnight" or anything, Bastard. Just because he is loaded, he thinks he can act like an asshole. Shit, he does not own this place, does he?

The Greek saw the old man lower himself into the back seat of the Towncar. His driver was young, and probably Hispanic.

Some job, coming over here in that car, at this time. Dangerous, too. Wonder what he is paid?

The Greek turned the lights off. Another day. Yet another tomorrow.

(Based on an exercise generated by Write This – 19-05-2005 14:16:12 - the story has to be set in a diner, and include a very rich person.)

Harry's Wheels

Harry had this old truck. It had been his grandfathers, once. Then, it had been left behind the barn for a number of years. Gran did not use it, and they all forgot about it. When Harry left to go to school, he needed wheels. And then he thought of the old truck, and went all the way back to the farm to pick it up.

But it needed so much work. He sanded and painted; downloaded a hell of a lot of advice from the Internet, and fixed the engine; the put new tires on; and so forth.

He took it for a spin, for the first time, near the farm. It ran smoothly along, in the huge corn fields they have in that part of the country. Then, a wheel gave in. Actually, it broke. Just like that. They had to tow it back to the farm.

Harry found a wheel on an obscure Web site that deals in spare parts for very old vehicles. He paid for it, using about the last cash he had, and waited. A week later, the wheel showed up, in the good old mail, of all the things.

The mailman was a woman, in fact. Harry realized he knew her, and she recognized him, too. April, she was, from kindergarten. Often had they been running through the fields, finding a special place where they could lie and look at the clouds. And as they got older, they explored other things, too.

She laughed as he signed the papers. She got back into her truck, and revved up the engine. Then she opened the window, and handed him a piece of paper.

“My number”, she said. “Just in case.”

She smiled that little, shy smile of hers. He put the scrap of paper in his pocket, and watched her drive down the long, straight road. Among all that corn.

It was months before he called. Then it was too late, apparently: a man who called himself “Gus” answered. Harry hung up. One lane to the past closed, forever.

(Based on an exercise generated by Write This – 18-05-2005 13:07:58; story has to include the Internet and a wheel)

The Tie

I didn't understand at first. There are two ends to the thing. It goes around the neck. You tie it. That part is what I do understand.

What my problem is, is that it does not come out looking very nice. Not like the ones other people wear. Mine is all crooked and shoddy; theirs, on the other hand, are always meticulously tight and neat and straight.

It would not normally worry me too much. Or not all: I have very few reasons to wear one. Normally.

This day, though, was quite different. This was the day of days: the day where I was having the interview for the job of my dreams. Or, at least, the first job after school that promised a decent pay, and a decent shot at moving up and on in life. Getting my own place to live, getting decent wheels. Having some spare change, for once.

And who knows, and stranger things have been known to happen: get a girl, get down with her, have a family of my own. That would show them, all of them: my family, who never believed I would go anywhere; the few friends, who generally think of me as the eternal nerd who will forever live in a dorm, eating Chinese takeaways (and having the empty boxes around to prove it.)

That damn tie, though. See: this job would require that I went out and talked to people, like customers and such. Gotta look nice for that. And if I couldn't even manage to look halfway decent for the interview -- well, you get the picture.

I was waiting in a cold, spare room on the seventeenth floor. Nice view of the city below; cheap plastic chairs (one wonders why? It is not as if this is the poorest corporation, is it now?)

But not a mirror in sight. And with my near non-existent tie-tying skills -- I do need one. Badly.

And time was of essence, now, and it was running out. Only minutes to go. I was breaking a quiet sweat, and started having that sinking feeling. I felt positively queasy. Too bad, though: I knew I was just the one for the job -- except for the tie thing. I was close to panic. Actually: more than close. I was panicking.

There was a noise behind me. This old geezer (he must have been more than close to retirement) came in through a door I had not until then noticed, and started cleaning. He pattered around, not even looking at me, not even talking to me. Only humming this silly, old tune (what was it? It was something I could almost remember, but not quite.)

Tick-tock. There goes the job. I felt drained. All the good things that should have, could have happened were suddenly fading away, and I could see myself, forever the nerd in the dorm (until they get rid of me, and then what? Move back with my parents? Find a bridge somewhere?)

I sat down, and hold me head in my hands. I was not crying, but close -- it is only that I don't tend to cry in public. So much hope. And now gone, just because of such a stupid, useless piece of apparel.

I heard a noise from the inner office. They were getting ready to come and call me, and that would be it.

I got up, and had almost decided to just leave right there, call it a day, call it quits, and go meet that dreadful fate of mine.

The old janitor looked up at me, and smiled. He gestured. Yeah, the tie. Even he can see the disaster.

Then he stepped over to where I was standing, and reached out, and touched the tie -- and I kid you not: barely touched it at all -- and it just fell into place, into a nice, straight knot, and then the door opened.

(Based on an exercise generated by WriteThis – forgot to write down what the task was.)