

The Line

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Adrift on a subway train hurtling into the gloomy unknown, my heart speeds up and beats in unison with the repetitive clanking of the train's metal wheels as my car rumbles over the evenly spaced electrified tracks. Soon, the snaky wagons slow down as the upcoming subway station comes into view with the concealed driver forced again to calculate the gradual use of the brakes to get the train to pull up and align itself properly along the seventy meter platform. As the chimes sound, the doors pull open again. Disoriented, I look down at my feet, noticing a knapsack, and look back up out of the car's window trying to decipher where I am. Strangely enough, I don't recognize the name "WASSARION" which is both written on the walls of the subway station and on a lit up sign in my subway car. As the chimes sound a second time, the doors close and I again feel apprehensive that I neither know where I am or where I am headed. As the subway train gradually lurches forward and gathers renewed speed, the platform soon disappears with its faint light dimming in the posterior distance, while another murky set of tunnels carries me towards a new mysterious state of chartered stasis. Just before the usual female robotic voice utters the upcoming station through my subway car's speaker system, I am cast out of the strange underground rabbit hole and rudely awaken in my bed with a heavy sweat on my forehead and back of my neck. As my eyes adjust to the dim light of the late morning, I notice I've had yet another feverish dream about being lost on a strange and unfamiliar subway system.

"Tell me about this preoccupation you have about Humber Heights' municipal subway system." Dr. Arpid says with a ballpoint pen in her right hand to jot down notes.

"Well... You see... I was at the rear of the train back in the summer of '97 when the big crash took place. Lucky to get out alive, really."

"So you're saying this recurring dream you have had is somehow connected to you surviving the subway crash?"

"I've dreamt a lot of things about the subway... Lately it's been about being lost in some kind of alien world where things are familiar at first, but nothing quite matches up with reality."

"It's not uncommon for trauma victims to experience night terrors and even flashbacks about their most challenging experiences. Tell me more about the day of the crash."

"Well, Doctor... When I think back to that day, I keep getting revisited by two things that I saw just before the crash. First, I have been haunted by a suspicious man with a briefcase and thick dark-rimmed spectacles who mysteriously left the train at Maypont, just before the fateful tunnel where my northbound train and the train in front collided. Just as we were pulling out of Maypont, another man that I don't recall too well, exchanged briefcases with that same fellow."

“Ok... So you’ve felt suspicious that these presences were somehow involved in the crash?”

“Yes... But there’s something else I noticed that day... When the train left Maypont... As we were heading into the darkened tunnel, I remember seeing a strange grey-haired man with a reflective vest walking briskly in the opposite direction. A few moments later, our train collided and I recall being thrown violently with the other subway car passengers toward the north end. All I remember after the impact, is us being plunged into darkness with many injured bodies in our car. One elderly woman was unconscious after being projected full force into a subway pole.”

“How did you get out of the train? Do you want to share that story with me?”

“Well... We were trapped in our car for almost an hour and a half... There was someone trying to revive and do first aid for the elderly lady I spoke about... After being stuck in the stuffy subway car for what seemed like an eternity, we could finally see transit personnel outside our train with flashlights, to try to assist us and lead us out of the crash site and back outdoors in the ravine directly above us.”

“Did you stay calm? Describe your anxiety when you were asked to leave the wreckage of the train and evacuate the subway tunnel.”

“Well... I was a bit nervous when the subway doors to my car were pried open. I kept thinking of the risk of getting electrocuted by the third rail alongside the train tracks. However, we followed the transit staffer leading us by flashlight and my nerves calmed down a bit when we finally went through an emergency exit where I could see the trees and the light of day. I’ll never forget the moment we exited the subway underground... I could see finally see the sun’s rays and breathe the fresh summer air, rushing up a grassy embankment which lead to a nature trail in Wichwhelm Ravine just north of Maypont along the old Barsom creekbed.”

“Did you share these stories with anyone? I know it’s been over fifteen years now since the crash. It might be quite cathartic to really open up about being a survivor of that summer day.”

“Thanks Doctor Arpid. I’ve always wanted to attend a ravine vigil for the crash. It would be nice if they had a memorial and if our city finally understood the value of putting a heritage plaque by the emergency exit where we finally escaped our underground confinement that sunny afternoon. I dream of this whole thing coming full circle one day. Maybe that will be the end of those nightmares and visions I’ve regularly had since.”

Three weeks after the monthly psychiatrist visit at Cloverleaf Clinic, I find myself commuting back home in the late hours before midnight. All alone on the west side of Main Station’s eastbound platform, I spot the distant lights of a rumbling subway train appearing to be heading in my direction. Approaching the end of my platform, I peer into the tunnel as the oncoming lights intensify to indicate the train’s approach is

imminent. Suddenly, I spot the faintly illuminated outline of a man in the tunnel on the side of the tracks ready to crank a large trip-arm lever. As the train lights start to blare some fifty or so yards away from me, I spot the same man putting all his weight across and downward to lower the lever, sending the oncoming train along a new set of tracks and into a separate tunnel. Having never before noticed similar track-level adjustments in the subway underground, I assume that the train was manually re-routed after being put “out of service” by transit control during the slow and non-peak hours of the commuters’ day.

Although unknown to me as this story’s protagonist awaiting a follow-up late night train along Line 3, a tale of clandestine intrigue is now unfolding again along Line “X”, a secret subway line used by the city’s criminal underworld to access Etherwood Station, the main secret access point to ‘Iron Bunker’.

“There could have been someone spotting me cranking the ether tonight.” A man with short and slightly wavy grey hair says after climbing up a small set of steps to the abandoned subway station, unmarked in the vast Humber Heights transit web.

“The ether train is always ‘not in service’ anyways... Even if there was someone on the edge of the platform, they’d just think you’re personnel involved in track maintenance or system upgrades. Chill out brother!” A man wearing pronounced spectacles says atop the platform with a small slender laptop under his left arm.

“I could clearly see a man looking into the tunnel towards us before we went around the bend.” A transit operator in full uniform says, minutes after leaving his post in the front subway car’s cabin through the first set of passenger doors.

“I’ve been going through some online feeds tonight. It appears there’s a rumour starting up that the city is planning for a memorial ceremony commemorating twenty years since the ‘Wichwhelm Subway Terror Plot’.” The man with the laptop says to the other two gang associates.

“I just hate those crash survivors. Wish they would just die off or go nuts so no one would listen to their annoying stories.” The man in the transit uniform says in a slightly sinister tone of voice.

“I could swear there’s one guy in particular who’s out to get us. I could tell I’d been seen that day just after messing up the fail-safe switch in Maypont tunnel.”

“Let’s just let this thing rest for a bit. We’ll try to stall the memorial by creating an incident in the ravine. What we need to do is try to make Wichwhelm our own again!”

Soon the three men leave the derelict subway platform and enter ‘Iron Bunker’ to carry out more conspiracies in the unchartered lower belly of the Humber Heights metropolis.

[...The End...]