

Refuge

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## Refuge

Trains ran by the house daily. Most of them zipping by, too fast to be useful. The late-night Trains, however, moved a lot slower. A knot formed in my stomach, my hands shook, and my throat got parched at the thought of hopping onto a moving Train. I wasn't sure I could manage, carrying what little belongings I had left, but staying wasn't an option. I had just escaped a predator, masquerading as a man of God. The thought of being here, in yet another extremely religious household, made my body contort with rage and my skin crawl. I would not allow myself to be vulnerable again! I tracked the late-night Train's speed and time for two weeks and estimated they moved slow enough to board. During which time, I had gathered enough food to last a week, if I ate sparingly. Having learned, in my 14 years, the less you eat, the smaller your stomach gets, I had eaten less and less over the last two weeks, preparing for the trip and was finally down to one meal a day. Which meant tonight was the night. The last boardable Train arrived around 3:00 am. I'd have to get in place by 2:30 am, if I was going to make it.

I took inventory and resented having to leave most of my music, but at least I had my Walkman and a few of my favorite tapes. I broke into the locked cabinet, holding my confiscated earring and stuck it in my pocket, retrieved the food I had stored up, and packed. Satisfied I was ready, I snuck out the window, thankful I had learned how to bypass the alarm contacts from another kid in the group home I was hastily extricated from two weeks earlier. I headed for the tracks and waited, making sure my path, alongside the Train, was clear of anything that might trip me, running with a full military duffle bag. Once certain, I sat down and waited for my ride. My fingers tingled, and my heart was racing. I thought it might stop beating all together when I saw the light from the Train.

I hid in some brush until the Engine passed, not wanting to be seen by the operator. I stood up and got ready to toss my bag into one of the open Doors. When the first Door appeared, I threw with all my might and missed, sending the bag bouncing off the side of the Train straight back at me. I dodged as it landed where I had been standing a second before. I cursed my aim, the Train, and anything else I could think of, picked up the bag and waited for the next open Door. Half of the Train had passed, and I was running out of time. To make this work, I'd have to throw before the Door was in front of me. With the next Door rapidly approaching, I readied myself again, this time preparing to dodge as well, just in case I failed again. I threw as hard as I could and watched the bag disappear into the darkened opening. Hearing the sound of it landing, amplified by the metal walls, I jumped, throwing my fist into the air, cheering "Yes!" I was so proud of myself. The fact that my bag was leaving without me didn't quite register. When it finally did, I started running to catch the Door but realized the Train was speeding up.

"Shit, I'm not going to make it."

I saw another Door appear. It's now or never. I pumped my legs as fast as I could and jumped for all I was worth.

Half of me landed in the car; the other half was dangling from the opening. I had a slight grip on the floorboards and held very still while I looked for something a little more substantial to grab. I saw a handle on the Door to my right, about four feet away, and decided to try to reach it, hoping to pull myself up. I slowly made my way across the floor, trying not to use the lower half of my body for fear of falling out. When I reached the handle, I gave it a few tugs to make sure it was secured. Satisfied it was, I grabbed the handle with both hands and tried to climb up. I almost succeeded when the Door suddenly came loose and slid about halfway closed. Now I was hanging from the handle, dangling outside the Train, my feet scraping the ground. Visions

of being pulled under the Train flashed through my mind. It suddenly dawned on me; I could die! I tried to lift my legs onto the floor but couldn't. TV made this look so much easier!

Sweaty palms were making it very difficult to maintain a grip on the handle. Suddenly my right hand slipped free, sending my body swinging to the opposite side of the Door. The sudden sting of my free hand hitting the exterior of the Train and my extreme aversion to dying instigated the unconscious reaction to grab the edge of the Door frame. I was now stretched across the Door opening, spread eagle, with my back facing the inside. Every instinct was vehemently protesting this stupid decision. I shut my eyes to the world speeding by as the Train continued to accelerate. I managed to get control of my panic long enough to catch my foot on the Door's threshold. Using my newfound leverage, I brought up the other foot and slowly walked back until I was inside the car. I collapsed on the floor, intensely relieved and very thankful to still be in one piece.

While lying there, trying to calm down, I remembered my pack was two cars ahead of me. The original plan was to jump off when I was in a secluded area to avoid detection. Now, that would require me to climb back out there and make my way across two cars. I curled up at the thought, hugging my knees to my chest, and decided it wasn't worth the risk. I'd have to take my chances wherever we ended up, hop-off, and quickly grab my pack the second we stopped. I sat up, placed my back against the wall, lit a cigarette, and watched the moonlit world pass by outside the Doors, wishing I had the Walkman from my pack.

I noticed the Train begin to slow down and got up to see where we were. As luck would have it, we came to a stop in a factory split in two by the tracks. There was no one around as I jumped out and ran to grab my pack, then quietly slipped out of the factory, following the tracks back the way we had just come. Once I was confident that I was far enough away from people, I

stopped and pulled out my Walkman, put in Tangerine Dream's Stratosfear, and continued along, feeling much better about life than I had in a long time. As the ethereal electronic music flowed through me, my mind drifted. I wondered how the people, I had just left, would react. Would they be upset, hurt, or would they understand it wasn't personal? They knew my sudden insertion into their life was because I had created a volatile situation by exposing the rampant abuse in a previous group home.

All things considered, hopefully, they would be glad I was gone. My mind snapped back to the present as I suddenly realized my entire body felt impossibly heavy causing my legs to quiver. With the adrenaline now gone, I could barely keep myself upright. Seeing a large field of tall grass nearby, I prepared a spot, as I had done when I was younger, making hideouts in overgrown brush. Using my pack and coat for a pillow and blanket, I laid down. My thoughts drifted back to the past. I wondered about the other guys in the group home. Where did they end up? Were they better or worse off? Did they hate me for bringing our secret to light? As I watched the night sky slowly surrender to dawn, I decided I was too exhausted to care. Finally feeling safe, I fell asleep to the music that provided me refuge.