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Fog

by Stephen Sottong

The six a.m. traffic report blared from the clock radio. Yet another wreck at the intersection of the Harbor and San Diego Freeways. Jeff sat up in bed and squinted at the milky glare coming through the sliding glass doors. Rising, he opened the door to the balcony. The morning air already carried the exhaust of a million commuters. Sun reflected off a thick blanket of fog that ended several stories below his floor. June gloom. Another lovely day in LA.

Jeff leaned on the railing and stared into the swirling, grey murk. Traffic would be gridlocked. He'd have to take the light rail, and the Blue Line would be crowded with other commuters like him trying to avoid the clogged freeway. He stretched. Life's normally hectic pace, once again, shifted into overdrive. He returned to the bedroom to begin the morning routine.

Half an hour later, breakfast bar in mouth, coat slung over his shoulder, Jeff jogged down the corridor lit in colored patches by a geometric stained glass Art Deco window. He pressed the call button for the elevator and waited. The residents had been assured the lift was completely modernized when the old downtown office building was converted to condos, but it still moved at a speed reminiscent of its vintage façade. On days like this, Jeff sometimes wished his life moved at a pace in keeping with these surroundings.

The bell sounded and the elevator doors slowly parted. Jeff squeezed through before they had fully opened and pushed the lobby button. As the car descended, he finished putting on his coat, leaned against the brass rail and tried to catch his breath. The car shuddered and he felt an enveloping chill, as if the fog had penetrated the building. The rumble of the air conditioning muted. Lights flickered. He glanced at the ceiling wondering if there was a brownout, hoping he wouldn't be stranded in this box. The vent cover was brass scrollwork. Jeff wondered why he'd never noticed it before.

The car resumed steady movement. The doors slowly opened and he squeezed through them into the lobby. A uniformed doorman held the outer door for him and wished him "Good day." Jeff walked through and paused, turning to stare at the unexpected figure. Shaking his head, he walked quickly to the light rail stop.

Foot traffic was heavier than usual. Figures passed Jeff in the thick fog bundled in coats and hats. Jeff could not remember when he'd seen so many people wearing hats. It must be yet another fad he had no time to contemplate. At 28, he felt older than his years — out of touch with his era. He pushed past the surprisingly slow pedestrians.

Workmen had been making repairs at his light rail stop the last time he'd used the system, but Jeff had not expected such an extensive remodel. They'd lowered the platform several feet and removed the ramp. He checked the street signs. This was the right place. A bell sounded

in the fog. A red light rail car approached. The color momentarily surprised him, but he remembered that a couple of the Blue Line cars had been repainted some years ago for an anniversary of the old Red Car line. Jeff thought the changes to the cars had been cosmetic, but this car had steps, and the door was as unfamiliar as the wooden bench seats inside.

The car prepared to move. A boy of about 12 in a weather-beaten coat and wool driving cap rushed aboard, pressed past Jeff, and hunkered by the window next to him on the seat, pretending to sleep. Jeff sat, immobilized, disoriented.

A man in a hat and uniform coat walked purposefully down the aisle and stopped in front of Jeff.

“Where you headed?”

“To the transfer station for the west bound cars.”
Jeff reached for his transit pass.

“Watts station, twenty cents.” Before Jeff could react, the man turned his gaze to the boy on the bench next to Jeff. “He yours?”

“No.”

The conductor leaned over Jeff and grabbed the boy by the ragged collar of his coat. “You tryin’ to freeload, kid?”

“No, sir.” The boy’s voice was small and quavered.

“Then where’s your fare?”

“I got it here somewhere.” The boy, still half in the air, fished through his pockets.

Jeff reached in his back pocket for change. He

quickly sorted out four dimes. “Here. For both of us.” As he handed them to the conductor, he noticed the profile of Mercury on the coins.

The conductor dropped the boy, turned, shook his head, and mumbled, “Another humanitarian.”

The boy sat and readjusted his cap. “Thanks, mister. He likes to toss kids off while the Red Car’s running.”

“Nice guy.”

“I’ll pay you back. Honest.”

Jeff watched the fog-softened cityscape pass the car window. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, honest. Twenty cents is a lot. Most folk’s ain’t got a dime to spare. I’ll make it good.”

Jeff smiled. “Okay, next time I see you.”

The boy looked out the window, watching the people on the fog-bound sidewalks. “Ain’t seen you on this car before.”

“I think I may have gotten on the wrong train today.”

The boy nodded. “Happens. There’s a lotta trains. Where ya headed?”

“I’m catching a train west to El Segundo.”

The boy tilted his head thinking. “You don’t look like somebody who’d work at the refinery.”

Jeff looked from the fogscape to the disheveled boy. “I don’t. Where are you going?”

“Long Beach. Gonna try to pick up some work at the Pike.”

The name triggered memories of talks with his

grandmother about riding a rickety roller coaster at the beach. Jeff stared at the boy blankly as the pages of his grandmother's cherished photo albums turned in his mind. He looked round at his fellow passengers. Their hats and coats, the women's purses and hair, the careworn expressions – nothing like the rush hour crowd. He blinked hard and took in his surroundings again. They remained stubbornly unchanged. Leaning against the wooden bench, he tried to slow his heartbeat.

The boy gave Jeff a puzzled look. "You okay, mister?"

"Yeah." He turned back to the boy. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

The boy shrugged. "No good goin' to school. No future there."

"Why?"

The boy tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. "You one of them rich folks?"

"No, I'm not rich. Why do you ask?"

"Way things been goin' lately, only rich folks have time for school."

Jeff took in his fellow passengers and leaned close to the boy. "Trust me on this one: there's no future working at the Pike. Times will get better. If you don't have an education, you won't be ready when they do." Jeff reached into his back pocket and, to his amazement, pulled two more Mercury dimes from it. "Take this. Go back to school. Believe me, you'll regret it as long as you live if you don't."

The boy stared at Jeff, warily at first, then pushed

the dimes away. “I don’t need it. School’s close. I can hoof it from here.” The boy got up, crawled over Jeff and headed for the door as the Red Car rolled to a stop. “I sure hope you’re right, mister.” The car stopped, and the boy walked into the fog.

Jeff sat back, watching the foggy dreamscape roll sedately past the car, breathing in the unfamiliar smells, expecting any moment to awake.

“Watts,” the conductor said.

Jeff rose, looked once more around the car, and stood by the door as it rolled to a stop. The familiar sight he knew as 103rd St. Station appeared through the fog. He walked out onto the pavement and stood there, alone, cocooned in fog as the car pulled away, unsure what awaited him.

From his right, voices rose. Jeff moved toward them. Slowly, the fog dissipated. A fast moving woman bumped into him without a word. Jeff let out a long breath and joined the crowd milling on the platform. A boy with a backwards ball cap talked on a cell phone. Jeff reached into his back pocket and pulled out his change. The familiar face of FDR appeared on the dimes. He shook his head and waited for a southbound train.

A blue car arrived and he pushed aboard with the rest of the herd grabbing the overhead bar for the trip, one stop, to Rosa Parks station. Amid the swaying crowd of travelers trying desperately not to notice each other, Jeff still felt in the wrong time.

Exiting as the last wisps of fog burned off in

the morning sun, Jeff crossed the tracks and took the escalator to the upper level. At the top, a train had left seconds earlier. Angry commuters, cursing their slowness, queued for the next train. Jeff moved to join the queue at a pace slower than usual. He stepped aside as an old man in a driving cap, one hand on a cane, the other on the arm of an equally old woman, walked in the direction of the down escalator. The man looked up, stopped, and put a hand on Jeff's arm. Jeff looked at the stranger's face. The man gazed back at him, open mouthed. The woman on his arm looked at the old man and tugged at his sleeve. The man's mouth moved, but no words came out. He looked down, reached into his pocket, pressed something into Jeff's hand, and folded Jeff's fingers around it. He patted Jeff's hand and finally said, "Thank you."

The old man took one last look at Jeff, shook his head, and obeyed his wife's persistent tug. Jeff watched, bemused, as the couple walked away. He opened his hand and saw two dimes. Jeff ran in the direction of the retreating figures. The sound of a train bell stopped him. Looking at his watch, he realized if he did not catch this train he'd be late for work. He took one last look for the couple, but they were out of sight. He ran for the train.

Jeff slipped into the familiar plastic seats as the train headed west. Gazing out the window at the offices, hotels, and warehouses that sped past, he looked beyond them, to the coast, hoping for fog.