

Text for PAP/STEM

Taken by Surprise

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CAUTION: Only fully trained and equipped subway employees should ever walk the subway tunnels and tracks. Pedestrians should never step down off a subway platform onto the track for any reason; if there is a dropped item on the track or an emergency, seek out an employee or police officer.

Tim loved working in the subway.

Loved it.

If you pushed him, he'd admit he loved it more than his father. Not more than his mother, but definitely more than his old man.

The subway, its tracks, tunnels, rails, and switches were his. Dirty and run-down to most everyone else, but magnificent and sprawling to Tim.

The strangest part is that Tim loved the subway most when it rained. When it poured, it didn't matter if Tim was even on the clock. He would check in, grab his vest, hard-hat, and lantern and walk the tracks.

It was just such a night.

Off the clock, but still on the job.

Thunder crashed overhead. The tunnel was a cool, wet 50 degrees.

Rain dripped through the grates overhead. Little streams flowed underneath the railroad ties. For Tim, this was when the subway really came alive and showed the world its true self--the greatest cavern ever built; the greatest network of caves ever used by man.

Tim missed the next tie, and his boot fell hard into the river running between the rails. A critter squealed at Tim's inconsiderate splashing, and he smiled to himself. The last bit of humidity from the 90 degree day moved across his face, pushed by a cool breeze behind. Tim turned into it and looked down the tunnel at

the long curving way, flecks of light glancing off the steel. He took a deep, satisfied breath, and walked on.

Tim did not always walk the subway; he did not always work for it. He used to have a job behind a cramped desk, in a cramped office, working with cramped people who couldn't imagine much beyond their cubicles. Needless to say, they did not share Tim's enthusiastic dreams of urban spelunking.

But Tim made those dreams a reality and left his cubically-caged mates for subterranean trusses, I-beams, and engineered slopes.

Moving further along the tracks, Tim grew aware of something completely unexpected out in front of him. With each step, the void ahead seemed to quiet more. After another 30 yards, Tim was standing in a completely silent stretch of tunnel. Water did not drip, critters did not scurry, and street traffic overhead was muffled beyond recognition. Tim felt anxiety grip him, and he immediately switched on his lantern. He needed more light than what laced off the tracks to investigate this exception.

The I-beams were the first sight to set his stomach seizing. There was not a single, rusted, wrought iron pillar as far as his lantern could stretch. Instead, the beams had been covered-or replaced entirely, he could not tell-by concrete columns, gray and sterile to the touch. The concrete had been purposefully pockmarked to absorb vibrations as trains passed through. While the iron beams had acted as tuning forks, allowing the clanging chorus of steel wheels on steel rails to resonate around a bend, the new pillars seemed capable of soaking up any din like a sponge.

Tim let his hand run over each geometric dimple and shuddered at the thought of every ding or clang already trapped, unable to dance along, weaving in and out of subway cars.

It was in that moment Tim realized also that there was no water dripping down onto his helmet from overhead. He looked up and was confronted by a modern ventilation duct, gently circulating the air. If his journey had begun here in this part of the tunnel he would not have known that rain was coming down in buckets up above.

Tim rested his chin on his chest, shook his head, and cursed to himself, *what have they done to this place?* His eyes turned downward, Tim realized that the streams between the rails had dried up. The ties were made of pre-poured concrete, the channel was carved with smooth right angles and drainage points all along the way. There was no sign of the ragged, splintered wooden ties that would give way under a car's weight and send a wobble through each passenger's legs.

What have they done to this place?

The anxiety started to creep back into Tim's mind. The pockmarked concrete pillars started to resemble the pressed fireproof boards used as part of his old cubicle walls. The space in between tracks looked like linoleum office flooring underfoot, the pre-poured railroad ties were like simple inlaid design work. The vent and clean truss work overhead resembled the ceiling and air conditioning grates that hung lifelessly over his old desk.

What have they done to my place?

Tim wasn't spelunking anymore. He was moving past the standard forms of an office. He was walking down rows of cubicles on his way to the water cooler, and he hated it. He wanted to go back to the rundown caverns he loved so dearly. He wanted to run his hands over a man-made creation that could not resist the pull of a more natural order. He wanted to walk through a space engineered to be one thing, but that had been reclaimed, over time, by a world greater than the design specifications.

It was in this moment that a train horn sounded, steady and deep. Tim lifted his head to watch twin eyes about 300 yards down the track moving toward him. He quickly stepped out from between the rails, off to the side between two columns. Making sure he was far enough back, Tim braced up against the pillar and waited for the train to pass.

The train began to file by him only a few moments later, but Tim only knew it by the faint rush of air. There was no sound, and he had closed his eyes in a vain attempt to hold back the tears running down his cheeks.

What have they done?

Tim cried for some time after the train passed. He knew it wasn't going to be long before the rest of the tunnels were redone in the same way. There would be nothing left of the subway of which he had grown so fond. He made his way back down the tunnel and out one of the access points. He was off the clock for good.

Back on street-level, the rain had stopped, thunder and lightning had abated. The moon was even beginning to peek out from behind the wisps of cloud. The city was coming back as people began to realize the storm was done with trying to stake a claim. Tim shuffled along, wondering, *what do I do now?*

He found a bench, sat down, and tried to push those searching questions out of his mind. He watched people step out into the night, hail cabs, meet friends, and walk into restaurants. He watched people enjoy the sterile streets, buildings, places, which had all pushed him underground to what had been the last place of refuge from the austere.

Tim longed to smile blissfully as these people did, to smile as he had only hours earlier at the sound of a critter's fearful squeal. But the smile would not come to his lips. They remained set; the thin line unparted, shallow breaths moving through his nose. *Do I leave?*

No one gave Tim much notice. He was only sitting silently, nothing threatening about him. It was as if he was part of the bench, no reason for concerned or worried looks. He didn't want to be part of this world, so the world did not acknowledge him.

The moon rose higher in a clear night sky and the streets were quiet once more. Tim stood and took off his hard-hat and vest. Moving to the nearest garbage can, he dropped them in without a second thought. Digging into his pocket, Tim found his subway badge and tossed that in as well. He set his lantern down beside the can for anyone to find and use as he or she wished. He took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out slowly through his mouth. *Where do I go?*

Tim walked the 20 blocks to the main train station. He quietly purchased a rail pass, destination unmarked, and found his way to the main board. The next departing train was already boarding. Tim stopped at a kiosk on the way to the track and purchased a newspaper. Taking the stairs, he was on the platform in moments, staring at a train that waited patiently for the last few passengers. Newspaper under his arm, Tim stepped on board and found an open seat by the window. The conductor sounded the whistle, calling for all aboard. The train doors closed, and Tim opened his paper as the train left the station.