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“Yea...uh...yes, they are,” Frank answered, hardly aware that he was even speaking as he stared out the window. For some reason he couldn’t remember what the actual question had been. *Something about his shoes* he thought, but at that particular moment he really wasn’t sure.

“Had a pair once me self,” came the bulleted response. “Just like those, actually.” The man continued speaking to him as he looked down and pointed in the direction of Frank’s feet. “Loved ‘em dearly, very comfortable.” The statements were delivered in short, staccato spurts and Frank watched out of the corner of his eye as the man punctuated his remarks with a smart nod.

He was lost. Pulling his gaze from the distant stare out the window, Frank turned to face the man directly. He turned to face the man that had just spoken to him—or more accurately—had *been* talking to him. Frank felt a tinge of discomfort as the slight and tidy man looked earnestly at him, wagging his finger in the direction of his shoes.

He had absolutely no idea who this guy was or why he was talking to him in the first place. But right now this guy’s identity and motivation were the least of his worries. What was playing heavily in the foreground of his consciousness was the realization that, besides not knowing how or why he’d started talking to this complete stranger, he had no idea *where* he was either.

“Don’t know what ever became of them,” the stranger spoke comfortably as if they’d been old friends just passing the time together. “Just *not there* one day.” The man cupped

his hand and made a flapping motion like pigeons taking flight from a crowded sidewalk.

“Probably thrown out by the missus, I’d imagine. She never seemed to care much for them.”

As he finished flapping his hand through the air he drew his arm toward his face, pulling back his sleeve to reveal a large gold wristwatch. The man squinted as he studied the timepiece and then began tapping the crystal face gently with his index finger as if he’d been waiting for some important event or activity.

Frank watched as the man finished his tapping and then returned his attention back to him. The man was older than he was. Judging by the amount of gray at his temples and the wrinkles around his dark eyes, he figured he must’ve been in his mid fifties—maybe even sixty or so.

Where the hell am I? With the man staring straight at him, Frank took a quick look around trying to appear as natural as he could and not let too much of his confusion show. He had that dazed feeling you’ve got right after waking up from a really, really sound nap. That—*oh God, was that a coma?*—kind of feeling. And stuck there in that waking instant kind of feeling he felt as if, any second now, it was all going to come flooding back to him. The strange cloud would be lifted and he’d remember everything—just any second now. But, for the moment, he couldn’t remember anything.

“You know how they can be,” the man continued, “when they get into one of their *cleaning* moods.” An artificial chuckle trailed the end of the statement and the man’s thick English accent clipped at his words as his head bobbed gently back and forth as if to

some inaudible melody. His eyes drifted upward, momentarily fixing on some invisible object in midair. Then he dropped his head and focused his gaze neatly onto the folded newspaper sitting in his lap.

Man this is weird. Frank shook his head and blinked hard. He was more than just a little bit confused. He was what you'd have to call *completely* confused. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know what time it was. He had no recollection of striking up a conversation with this man. He didn't even know how he could've started a conversation. You see, Frank wasn't what you'd call a connoisseur of idle chitchat. He didn't particularly like conversing with total strangers and was always more than just a little uncomfortable when they chose to do so with him. He was, more often than not, the one that sat quietly in the corner minding his own business—which is exactly what he wished this old guy would do.

Still consciously trying to hide his growing confusion, he snuck another quick look around. He could tell that he was on a train—or a subway car to be more accurate. It was easy enough to spot since he'd spent nearly his entire adult life commuting to and from hell on cars just like this one. But, as hard as he tried, he just couldn't remember boarding this train.

Although the sounds and the smells were familiar sensations—the whooshing, humming of the car's movement along the tracks and the feel of the cool musty air as he drew it in through his nose. But the car itself definitely felt unfamiliar. It wasn't that he

felt out of place there. He didn't feel like he wasn't supposed to be there. He just couldn't remember getting on the damn thing in the first place.

Just find something familiar, something that'll jog it loose. Frank tried to focus on something outside the window. If he could just catch a station sign or a terminal stop... but it was too dark outside to see anything at all. The inside of the car the was lit from a row of cream-colored plastic squares across the ceiling. Between the ceiling and the top of the windows there were advertisements anchored inside shiny metal frames. In one of them, a woman smiled while her hair blew in strands as if she'd been standing in the middle of a huge wind tunnel. While another showed a lone couple in bathing suites as they walked serenely down a seemingly deserted stretch of pristine sandy beach. A single palm tree in the foreground had writing across its trunk that said, *your day; come feel the magic...*

At random intervals, the overhead lights flickered as the car jostled and rocked from side to side. Teardrop shaped handles swayed from the ceiling as the car bounced in unison with the rhythmic clanking of the steel rails beneath. Frank was sitting on an inward facing row of cracked, vinyl bench seats. The man, now intently reading his newspaper, was seated across from him on the other side of the aisle. An aisle neatly divided into sections by several vertical chrome poles running from the floor to the ceiling.

A wave of fatigue tugged at him and almost pulled him under. It was that kind of yearning tiredness that went way past just being sleepy. His arms were heavy and it was

surprising to him just how comfortable the seats were. Like a feather pillow coaxing him to lie down and drift into a deep, deep slumber.

Am I loaded or something? Frank held his hand up in front of his mouth in an effort to smell his own breath. Because if he had been drinking, that might've done something to help explain the awful feeling of disorientation. Drinking or...or worse... But it had been years since he'd done anything more serious than alcohol—back in college, actually. And even then it was only pot. He'd never quite gotten into that whole drug thing. At that time in his life it'd just seemed far too counter productive to him. There were things he wanted to accomplish. A 100k a year just wasn't going to jump into his lap. And he knew that VP positions at Fortune 500 companies weren't routinely handed out to pot-heads. He had big things to do and all that other stuff just slowed him down. Back then his dreams were as big as life itself; a big house in the right neighborhood, a big stable and successful income, a Mercedes Benz 350SL (leather of course)...his was the true American dream, the dream of every upwardly mobile young American male—to make his first million by thirty and to retire by forty-five. Yea...his dreams. What a funny thought was now.

But Frank couldn't shake that post-pot-high kind of feeling that had made itself perfectly at home inside of his head. That's what it felt like. That lost, disjointed feeling you'd have right after coming down from a particularly intense marijuana buzz. But there was no sign of the lingering smell that always permeates your clothes and skin. No cotton mouth, either. No desire to eat everything in sight.

Again Frank looked over the car, trying to get his bearings. He was alone except for the elderly gentleman across the aisle. The guy was dressed in a dark gray suite and was wearing, what looked like, a camelhair raincoat. As he studied the man, Frank figured he was a little bit on the bohemian side because, although creeping back from his forehead in front, his hair was just long enough to hit the collar in back.

Again, Frank shook his head and blinked deliberately. Again, he tried in vain to clear the sludge from his brain. And, again—nothing came to him.

Did I stop at Rudy's after work? Sometimes he did that. Billy T. was always the instigator. He'd show up in his office with Scooter around 4:30 and tell him how important it was that they have an 'off-site' meeting. He'd known Billy Thompson since high school and although his brand of reckless abandon had always gone against Frank's own even sensibilities that sort of rebellious behavior was becoming more appealing to him with each passing year.

But lately those 'off-site' meetings had been few and far between. He didn't have any trouble remembering that was true enough. In fact, he didn't seem to have any trouble remembering certain aspects of his life. He had no trouble recalling just how disapproving his wife was of the Rudy's nights out with the guys. He knew that she didn't like that at all. But he just couldn't remember getting onto this train car.

It had to be a nap—a really hard nap—but it felt more like he'd just come out of a damn *coma* than a nap.

“That’s it,” Franked mumbled half out loud as he rubbed his eyes with the back of his balled up fists. *I was just having a little nap and now I’m still half asleep.*

“Uhhh?” the man raised his head in response to Frank’s mumbling.

Frank shook his head quickly back and forth while waving his hand to indicate that he wasn’t actually talking to him. Then he broke eye contact and looked down at his lap. He felt silly and didn’t want the old man to know just how loose his grip on reality really was.

All I’ve got to do is finish waking up. And then it’ll all come back to me—any second now... Sneaking a quick peak up, Frank saw the man smiling at him. *How embarrassing.* He felt like an idiot and didn’t particularly like it. Again, he diverted his gaze back to the couple on the white sandy beach, pretending to read each word of the ad with profound interest.

“Is this your normal tube?” the British gentleman asked deliberately to ease the unspoken tension. “The train I mean...is this your regular route?”

“Yes,” Frank replied without thinking. “I mean, no...I’m...not sure.”

Damn it, good cover! Frank’s own realization of just how stupid he sounded only added to the flush of embarrassment now warming across his cheeks. Without being able to stop himself, he locked stares with the man, this time unable to break eye contact. He wished that he could somehow just sink out of sight. Melt down into the seat and disappear. Truth was that he didn’t know *what* route this was. It might’ve been his

normal one. He hoped it was. But it seemed nicer. And it was certainly less crowded than he was used to.

The man studied Frank's face with intent, looking from eye to eye and then back again. He nodded at Frank and smiled a little smile as if to say, "I know exactly what you mean. I often feel *confused* myself."

Again, the man's attention returned to the paper in his lap and again, Frank was thankful for the way he'd stopped talking without any kind of cross examination. As if he was signifying that Frank's answer was really not as important as the simple act of exchange itself. By not speaking he seemed to be saying, that the words were really insignificant when compared to the subtle communication that occurs outside the bounds of spoken dialog. And that, right there, might've been what Frank disliked the most about idle conversation. All that...blah, blah, blah stuff without saying a damn thing. It all seemed like more of an excuse just to hear yourself talk than anything else.

Frank found himself wondering if the man was actually able to sense how he felt. And that made him wonder just how outwardly bewildered he did look. *Can he tell that I can't remember a damn thing?* Or was this feeling just a product of his own overactive paranoia? He allowed his eyes to study the man while he was reading his paper. He had, what Frank would call, a *good* face. He seemed...honest...even empathetic.

I think he does know. And inside, it did feel like the stranger had picked up on his sense of confusion. That remark about 'your normal route'—that was more than just a question, wasn't it? He knew something, Frank was sure of it.

The man looked up from his paper, catching Frank's eyes briefly before returning his attention to his wristwatch. *Again with the wristwatch?* Frank tried to appear uninterested, but for some reason, the man's preoccupation with his watch made Frank uneasy. Maybe it was because he himself didn't know what time it was. Or maybe it was something about the way the guy studied it so intently—so seriously. All he knew was that the wristwatch thing creeped him out. And that, along with the other feeling—the not knowing where or what—was making Frank edgier by the minute.

In the distance, he heard the sound of a train whistle. He heard the clatter of the tracks beneath him and he allowed himself to be comforted by the gentle and erratic sway of the car. Frank closed his eyes for a moment and took a long slow breath. Drawing the moist, stale air in through his nose he could almost taste his surroundings. Occasionally the lights blinked on and off, ever so briefly leaving the car in absolute darkness, like a negative flash bulb going off and pulling the light from its surroundings. Frank didn't mind the momentary darkness as the lights flicked on and off but, for some reason, he was filled with an icy chill every time the lights went *completely* out—leaving the car in pitch blackness. The absolute darkness made him feel way more than nervous. It was a sensation that bordered on a kind of all encompassing panic.

"I find that simple breathing exercises work best for me," the man spoke freely as if he'd been right there inside Frank's thoughts the whole time. "It's remarkable to me how they do help to take the *edge* off." The man followed the comment with a deep penetrating stare into the Frank's eyes.

He was startled by this intrusion into his daydream. Adjusting uncomfortably on the bench seat, he turned away from the man in order to avoid responding to the eerily psychic comment.

“Three quick breathes in through the nose,” the man demonstrated by closing his mouth, flaring his nostrils and making three loud breathing sounds. “Then I release slowly through the mouth.” Again, the man demonstrated by shaping his lips into an “O” and blowing the air out slowly from his mouth. Frank found his gaze fixed on the man and he could feel the look of dumbfounded amazement creeping across his face. But, hard as he tried, it was too late to keep it from showing.

At the end of his overly exaggerated exhale, the man held still for several seconds, frozen perfectly in time like a wax statue. Then he snapped, “Yup! Oxygen to the brain...nothing better to clear the fog from the old noggin.”

Whether urged on by the overwhelming disorientation or by the growing feeling of panic churning in his stomach, Frank was compelled to seek answers—from anywhere he could. Even if it meant looking stupid in front of a total stranger, it had to be done. The answers were just not coming to him on his own. Besides, he figured he’d never see this guy again anyway so what the heck?

He looked the car over one more time in a last ditch effort to find some kind of marking or indication of its destination or origin. Something—anything—to shake his memory loose. Left, right, top, bottom...nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Frank said, trying to relax the contorted look he felt growing on his face, “ah, can you tell me exactly which train this is?”

In response to the seemingly absurd question, the man looked directly into Frank’s eyes, but this time his gaze dug down to another level. There was something in the man’s eyes, something soothing and yet at the same time, something painfully invasive. Frank found himself terribly uncomfortable with the stare, but was unable to turn away. As if there were a secret hidden in the man’s eyes, a secret Frank didn’t want to know. Then, just before the look became too painful to bear, a smile softened the man’s lips.

“Nigel Peterson,” he announced formally and then leaned forward slightly, extending his hand in the process. “What’s your name, sir?”

As quickly as it had built, the tension vanished. Like a puff of smoke wisped away by the man’s warmth and charm, Frank felt oddly at ease with the abrupt introduction.

“Frank.” Frank leaned forward just enough to grab the man’s outstretched hand. “Frank Shannon. I sell industrial hydraulics for a small company down—”

Frank sat back down without finishing his sentence and began rubbing his forehead with his index finger. “Look, I’m sorry. This is a little weird, but I must’ve dozed off pretty hard there for a minute and now—”

“I understand,” Nigel broke in empathetically. “I understand completely.”

Frank was starting to feel uncomfortable again. How could this guy “understand completely?”

“At times we all feel a little confused about where we’re going.”

That's a strange way of putting it. Frank couldn't figure out what this guy was thinking about. Maybe he was just trying to pacify him. Whatever it was, his statement didn't do anything to answer Frank's question. It was just making things worse.

"Look, it's not like that," Frank said, distinctly recalling why he didn't like to engage in conversations with strangers. "I just meant that I...well, I mean..."

It was a real struggle for Frank to gather his thoughts. The problem was that he didn't know what he was even trying to ask. It's hard to just come out and tell a total stranger that you can't remember how you got there or that you don't know where *there* is.

"Take this train for instance," Nigel continued without any acknowledgement of Frank's internal struggle. "Or, let's say trains in general. They're a wonderful way to travel, don't you think?" Nigel paused as if patiently waiting for a response. When he didn't get one he continued, "Whether you're traveling on holiday or just returning home. There's something uniquely comforting in the journey itself. Don't you think, Mr. Shannon? May I call you Frank?"

Nigel watched as the turmoil built on Frank's face. He watched as Frank struggled—as if he'd been a fish on the bank trying to flop back into the water. But at this moment, it seemed as though it was Nigel that knew more about Frank than Frank did about himself.

"Any journey is a transition, Frank. It's always about leaving *here* and moving *there*," Nigel motioned from left to right, "but during the journey—the travel time—you're really in *neither* place. Does that make sense, Frank?"

Again there was a pause—again the opportunity arose for Frank to respond. But he was only interested in the answers to two questions at that moment; *where was he* and *how the hell did he get there*. He had no idea where all this talk about *the journey* was leading, but it really seemed to be irrelevant. Now the urgency that had begun snapping at Frank's heels was reinforcing his distaste for idle chitchat.

"Moving from known to unknown," the English gentleman continued to study Frank as he spoke.

Where am I? Where am I going? How'd I get here?

Frank's head was spinning and all of Nigel's mumbo jumbo was starting to irritate the hell out of him. His rambling was starting to sound like static mixed in with the background noise from the train. Blah, blah, clank, clank, rumble, rumble. The wash of sound poured in through his ears like a raging torrent, systematically eroding his ability to think or to reason. Now he *was* starting to panic. It was welling inside of him like a slow brush fire at the edge of the forest. Frank needed some answers and he needed them quickly or he felt like he was going to lose it.

Without much effort Frank found himself tuning Nigel out as he spoke. His lips continued to form words and the sounds were leaving his mouth, but all Frank heard was the metal on metal rhythm of wheels and track. Clack, clack, clack, clack.

He leaned forward and cradled his head in his hands. He covered his eyes with his palms and then cupped his fingers over his ears. He tried to block the whirlwind of

chaotic sound from coming into his head, but it was no use. With his fingertips, he carved little rings into his hair as he slowly massaged his scalp.

With eyes still closed, he raised his head and leaned back against the window behind him. *This is a nightmare*. It had to be just a really bad dream. He couldn't remember getting on the train. He couldn't remember what he was doing before he got on the train. He couldn't remember his chest ever feeling this tight before. And he had no idea where he was headed. So if this was just a dream then all he had to do was force himself to wake up. It was that simple. That's all, just wake up.

Frank grabbed a chunk of flesh at the top of his thigh and pinched it hard before snapping his eyes open—only to see Nigel smiling squarely at him. As far as he could tell, the soft-spoken English gentleman had been talking the whole time and was now waiting patiently for some kind of reply.

This is a dream, Frank thought trying hard to convince himself of the fact.

"It's not a dream Frank. This is reality." Nigel pursed his lips and made a little sucking sound between his teeth. "Or at least it's as close to reality as any of us will ever get."

This was getting way too creepy. The man looked harmless enough but his increasingly intrusive insights into his thoughts were starting to give Frank an icy cold feeling. He had to get out of this place. He had to get out of this car.

So he stood and walked away from the strange British aberration. Grabbing pole after pole to steady himself he made his way to the rear of the car and pulled smartly on the door handle. It was either jammed or locked. Or maybe it was just the last car.

Frank smushed his forehead against the glass in the door and cupped his hands around his eyes, but it was too dark to see anything outside. Not a thing. The car bounced violently and the lights flickered again, this time staying out for a few seconds. Frank felt the goose flesh rush up the back of his neck as he stepped backward and steadied himself against one of the chrome metal poles. From somewhere close by, a train whistle echoed through the darkness. Again, the car bounced and shook and Frank almost fell over as he lost his grip on the pole and was knocked forward.

In angry defiance, Frank turned and waddled like a drunken sailor toward the front of the car. He was careful not to make eye contact as he passed the man with the white temples. At the front of the car Frank tried the door latch to no avail. This door, too, was locked. Again, he pressed his head to the glass and peered out into the empty blackness, desperately searching the darkness for something—a flicker of light, a sign...anything. But the darkness just seemed to suck all the light into itself, like everything that ever was or ever would be was being pulled into the blackness just outside the window. Frank felt like the only real existence at that moment was the one that existed inside of that train car. A frightening thought. The train had become the center of all reality while previous realities had either been put on hold or just sucked away into the darkness outside.

Frank wiped his clammy forehead with his sleeve. He closed his eyes and listened. He listened to the clankity-clank of the steel wheels under the car. He could feel the low rumble and steady vibration. He could feel the vibration coming up through the soles of his feet and he could sense the power behind the massive engines. The low frequency

sounds swirled in and out and mixed with high-pitched clatter from beneath the floor.

The rhythmic pattern of the wheels provided a ringing, almost musical backdrop to the slurry of sounds in his head. In a way, it was difficult to pick out what he was hearing now from the past reflections floating around inside of him.

Inside the maze of sound, Frank could hear music. Or at least he hoped that's what it was. It sounded like Don Henley singing and he could remember having breakfast with his wife Sarah that morning. Over the years, she had played that CD to the point of making him sick, but he could never say anything because he knew how much she loved it. Besides, he was the one that had gotten it for her. He knew how much she loved music and he knew how much she adored Don Henley.

After twelve years of marriage, he knew just about everything about her. And like other aspects of his life, this was one that he had no trouble at all remembering. That morning, she'd gotten up early and made blueberry muffins—he could still smell them. Not from scratch, Sarah was never what you'd call *Suzy-homemaker*, but she was perfectly capable of opening a mix and dumping it into a bowl.

He could see her so clearly, stirring the batter and smiling at him with a muffin powder mark across her cheek. He remembered giving her a big hug and hearing that little 'mmm' sound she made whenever he squeezed her real tight. He loved holding her in his arms and the he loved when she squeezed him back.

Another bump and a quick flicker and Frank turned to see Nigel smiling up at him. Again his penetrating stare dug into his subconscious, seemingly rooting around at will.

Frank couldn't shake the feeling that Nigel knew exactly what he was thinking about and it scared the crap out of him. Was he somehow revealing the deepest secrets of his personal life by doing nothing more than just thinking about them?

With a rising queasiness in his stomach and a renewed sense of helplessness, Frank sat down next to the door at the front of the car. He was sweating again and he mopped his forehead with his forearm. He felt naked and exposed. Because the bench seats faced inward there was no place he could go to get out of eye-shot from the creepy British guy. So he sat with his arms folded and his eyes closed, thinking about his wife and the blueberry muffins.

2

"The alarm's gonna go off any minute, hon'."

Frank knew that Sarah was really saying, "Why don't you turn off the alarm before it goes off?"

"Hmmm? Uhhh...yeh." he rolled over, reaching over the top of her and squinted through one eye at the digital clock on the bed side table. "It's only 6:30," he whined as he smacked his lips, trying to get his tongue unstuck from the roof of his mouth.

"Angel," Sarah whispered in that drawn out, almost scolding tone as she tucked her nose up under her husband's chin for her morning nuzzle.

"Let's just lay here and snuggle?" Frank scooped her up with one arm and moved her as close as he could. He kissed the top of her head and silently thanked God for his one