

## **Streetcar**

**By Adair Broughton**

The streetcar turned the corner slowly like an ancient and fading dragon now humbled and sad, its grey scales fighting dulled red paint. The metal tin, its sheen lost to weather, was bent awkwardly as it turned the corner, somehow fragile for such a massive metal container moving this slowly. It was fighting for space already its own, courtesy of the tracks that cut through the concrete landscape. There could easily have been a groove, carved out of the road from years of incessant journey. It continued forward steadily, laboriously, watching her all the time but indifferent to how she felt, like an old man who knows so much he can't speak or knows so much he will not say. It was no threat; seemingly old and tired like the city itself, this city of rain. Each creek of metal was an aching joint or bone.

Years ago, the streetcar would have caught the pleasure of people's eyes. It would have been a main attraction, a centrepiece of movement and a sign of the pride and progressiveness of the developing nation. Red showed passion, blood and anger but even a new coat of paint could not provide its lost shine. As it passed, people would have smiled, wished to be on it. Those days had gone, submerged into adulthood.

Bit by bit the city had nurtured a concrete wall that surrounded the main streets like a cage without its lion. Condominiums but not communities were built and people could rise up from the streets but all they could see were matching lives in the windows opposite that reflected streetlight and pollution. It was possible to watch shadows but that was as friendly and as gratifying in alienating loneliness as it was to shadowbox.

There were no seasons in the city, snow quickly melted in winter, and the sun found it hard to penetrate the grey walls that closed in life. The rain always seemed to find a way to dominate. Temperature was the only thing that told tales. There had been no rain for two weeks and people's nerves were on edge. Unexpected change did that to people. They had soon forgotten the years of complaint and the desire for more than a few days without the background of cloud and constant drizzle. Grey was a way of life and blue unnerved them when it actually happened.

The girl looked down, focussing on a tin that was pushed into the edge of the curb. It made her sad, she didn't know why. Just a can squashed by rushing feet, a tramps meal or a dropped shopping item but still powerful to her, important to her for the very fact it induced reflection. The label had fallen off, pulverised to dust or blown away as easily as the years had been. It would have made a great photograph, especially in black and white. Thinking of taking pictures changed her perception of things. The intimacy with which she gazed at erroneous objects coerced meaning from colours, even those that appeared bland. It gave objects a place in the world as if the inanimate could also have personality or soul, sometimes more than people. But she knew this was her own creation, absorbing feelings because she wanted to give them but found something stopping that, the invisible shield.

That morning the blue that separated the condos when she looked up seemed unique, a strip of sky like a runway to dreams that had nowhere to take off.

She was an adult scraping the edges of youth, like a comfortable ripped shirt caught on barbed wire. She could never bring herself to ditch that 'shirt', it wasn't always about the comfort. Life appeared better in the past, but memory was selective and she knew that more than anyone. She was in reality as naked as the 'emperor and his new clothes' except no one told her how great they looked. She felt like a flame did in the wind, beautiful but tenuous, something that could be blown out at any time but precious in its vibrancy and dancing delight for that very fact. Time was a gift, a present of the past to give to the future but not wrapped up like a false Christmas. She wanted something raw and under produced, forgotten and derelict. She wanted a ditch where the road could betray the journey. She longed for the place where every day wasn't a reminder of what could have been or what should be.

She looked again at the streetcar, as it made its laborious lunges, then conjured images of a giant's foot bearing down upon it, squashing with ease and lacking any remorse, the same way many feet had treated this tin. She thought of the people inside and her lucky escape, then she noticed the driver stare at her, probably pondering what drugs she had taken to appear so dreamy, or out of it.

The streetcar was silent as she walked on. She could feel eyes on her, maybe cursing her delay of a few seconds, penetrating her desire to be invisible. Time was important to some people even if one second was irrelevant in its overall demise. People always accepted long delays better than small ones, a quirk of humanity maybe. Insouciance was a blessing that few people could appreciate.

She was alert to the different smells rather than the faces as she walked down the streetcar. Someone was already drunk on this moving park bench, the alcohol not quite powerful enough to counter the headiness of cologne emanating from the young man in a suit trying hard not to look at her. No day was fresh when it contained alcohol; she worried for these people's lives for one second then didn't care the next. She never looked at the tired faces and blank stares but she knew the eyes that did bother to look up were on her; some innate awareness left over from an evolutionary eon, survival and perpetual alertness regarding and analysing the safety or danger in the surroundings.

This city was faceless even when so many eyes surrounded her. None spoke in the mornings. Whispered calls into mobiles could not send gossip further than their ears, but she was hardly interested in one-way talk. Conversations about the wine the night before and its salacious effects would equally irk her and make her feel the tinge of jealousy. Who wanted to organise that night's meal before breakfast. A few years ago she had felt so lonely that she had pretended to have a conversation into the silent hand held electronics. Since then whenever she saw people talk on the phone she wondered how many were doing the same thing. If there was a real conversation, what secret messages were being relayed between the empty souls of the city's population? What was the real purpose of privacy? Was something better because no one else knew? Her grandma had told her a secret was a small shame, that people inevitably wanted known to the public. She hadn't really understood her grandma and time had taken her away before she ever could.

She passed more people, dodging a leg sticking out like a broken branch fallen across a path. Already the streetcar was moving away in its repetitive cycle. She walked past the smell of newsprint, without any interest in the fingernails that held the paper, using her own fingers to grip the cold steel that was searching for her heat, steadying herself against the infrequent jerks of a bored driver or tired engine that was only ever given pretence of care. She heard the rustle of a turning page, paragraphs moving from famine to move reviews. Nothing new was ever written, nothing good was ever told, and that should not be news to anyone. News was read, rarely acted upon. So many died in tragic ways, did people feel better than it hadn't happened to them, that it continued the pretence of infallibility? Nobody ever wrote of each tragic birth that was life. Yet she knew there was some good, something worthwhile and nice in the world and her life. She had felt it, knew its imminent delivery. Excitement was the motivator, the unknown its friend. Today was the day she would find out, her nightly contemplation and longing thoughts stoked enough desire to combat that shield. She would ask and then she would know.

She walked past the pretty girl with glasses who made her daily exit at the library stop. That huge building of stone was colder to look at than it was to touch. Huge stones that should have been magnificent looked like a child's drawing of a broken architectural dream. Concrete had more powerful roots than trees and a shot of colour; a priceless piece of autumn drowning in discontent only seldom lacerated this forest of grey.

When she used to read, when books were company, words had struck her more than the images, as if the sum of the words were greater than the parts described. Each leaf in autumn became a flower a French philosopher had said. She had wanted to move, not run away but disappear, find something beautiful for her eyes and senses, something outside of the pages that would nurture knowledge but not be in debt to living and breathing experience. How could that ever be possible? It was too easy to melt into the mainstream and flow to nothing, pulled by a tide of fatigue and responsibility and missed moments of. ...something. But then...like everything else, this was just a transient feeling and she knew tiredness was both less than and more than a nights sleep and imagination itself was governed by more than lost and wishful thought.

She was not encased in doom, hidden in a moving tomb. There were many moments of brightness when she could forget everything except the happiness of the now and enjoy the simple pleasure that her life could bring. When these moments happened, it was like she had access to a significance that was always just out of reach but never less magnificent for that reason. As soon as she asked if she was happy, that was when that 'magical' moment disappeared.

She looked at the girl instead; to take away from the fact something had kept her here, in this place, in this city, in this country. That very thing, which a tingle of excitement denoted, was only a few blocks away. Maybe she didn't need to look any further than that. Today she would know.

The librarian, for that was the obvious presumption she had made would always stop and look down at the soles of her feet whenever she departed the streetcar. As the streetcar jolted like a limp convulsion heading to the next stop, she would smile just a

little and the girl looking at her shoe would fade from her line of sight marking the end of another moment that marked the unceasing routine that had trapped her. She could bank her life on small things like that, to the every day things that didn't seem to change. She was a voyeur to eccentricity of an event she pondered hard at understanding. What were its now intriguing origins? Did the girl consciously know she was doing it? Why did it make her smile?

An accountant would climb onto the streetcar at the next stop only to depart as suddenly at the next. She felt it took more effort to wait and climb, sit down only to depart again than it would to walk the block between stops. What was his reason? His slim line figure did not denote laziness. He counted numbers all day but he would never count, not where it mattered, at least to her. Did the man have a wife or girlfriend that loved him, felt her life would be lost without him. How can one person mean so much to someone and nothing to another? It upset her that the love would be something private between just those two people, all those moments unknown to others, lost to time. Maybe it was special for that very reason; they had something real, even if it was a non-physical entity, a feeling that no one else had. The gift of a unique person was priceless but it seemed costly when she deemed a little freedom would be lost too. Giving that freedom was her understanding of love. At the moment she could afford neither. Was that wife or girlfriend just another lost face to the city devoid of interaction, or maybe it was actually her who was the insignificant particle that was left out of the Brownian motion of city life?

Why had that man, the suit and the insignificance made her feel this way? Or did her mind try and focus and hook itself into the bland to help focus her on change which didn't seem to be near. She wanted all the stories of these people but not have to learn about them, to absorb by osmosis rather than age or not even that, just to know. She wanted the experience rather than them, but not have to go through the motions of gaining it. She was afraid to approach the meaningless with which each of them would see her. It was a reflection she knew, like a mirror of truth that told the occasional lie. All these people felt the same as her she was sure; they just didn't ever say it, the same way she didn't. Something needed to give, or someone. Who would first?

She sat down and lost herself to the morning, embedding herself into thoughts of a distant place, she had no idea where, some singularity only described by infinity but not being unbounded, a paradox of contemplation. She shared her life with these people, saw them daily, during the week and she entertained ideas and pictures of their lives, these familiar strangers. They were part of her life but never part of her. Where did she belong?

The weekend was where she refrained from interaction, reading and pressing keys to communicate with the bodiless around the world. It was strange how people who could not form judgements by sight responded with such passion to other people online. The digital world formed bonds and attachments that were maybe impossible in the macro world of work, weather and wear. People sharing similar geographical locations kept whatever small distance they could. Television wasn't an interaction; it was a more interesting streetcar ride. She liked movies though, engaging with make-believe, short stories she could eat like fast food. Books, an old love, became a burden. It was like moving from carpet to a laminate floor, one was comfortable but

the wear and tear and age became factors in choosing something else, something modern and clean. She did miss the books.

For someone who had so much time she found her thoughts were selfish with it, yet the process of interpretation and finding meaning in things became a salutary nod to her past study but also an engaging use of flowing moments. Did time really flow? It appeared so; every experience was motion of matter, essentially what time was. Yet it was not absolute. It took billionths of a second to look across a street, one and a half seconds to see the moons as they are 'now', millions of years for starlight's photons to hit the eye. The only now was hers and hers alone. No now was ever consistent with her slice of space-time. She knew this was meaningless in thought but it did induce her to ask if there was an absolute smallest moment in time. She was getting ahead of herself. To even say that made to no sense.

She wanted better insights but it was a lot harder to engage deep thought than she could imagine. Did she have some missing intuition? She did not think to stop herself imagining, to instigate a useless breath of passion against the ever-forceful wind. She missed her student years, when everything seemed to aim to a purpose, when possibility was something that pushed the day rather than faulted it. How many failed dreams occurred and disappointments in life were accepted as the days became weeks and all the thoughts and potential of having an education only taught misgivings about when the success parents dream of for their children ever happens. She could understand why the driver felt her on a come down. What had he dreamed of ten years previously?

Yet work wasn't some depressing hole that absorbed light from her eyes and enthusiasm from her soul. Her shoulders and posture were full of pride, a cheeky swing of the hips or bouncing steps laid waste to the idea she was fully trapped in some monotone existence of depression and disconsolation. Life wasn't black and white; a person was a rainbow, complicated, colourful and changing; happy one day, sad the next, like sunshine after rain. So what if there was an undercurrent that drowned false economy of life's treasure. People could learn to swim. It was not like she was on her own. The only thing wasted was advertising space and that's what she sold, her bubbly and even cheery voice the perfect veneer for a deep solitude that ran across the sea of madness like a tsunami. She was selling something to somebody who wanted to sell something. How could anyone find purpose in that? She wondered how much she could advertise her soul for then realised she may need to keep it, depending on the answer.

It was like the chicken and the egg, about what came first, but neither did, not really, not when you considered evolution. There wasn't suddenly a chicken like there wasn't suddenly an egg. It was a slow process; mutations that were favourable providing an advantage selected over those that were not over generations and years. But she had on her mind a different kind of evolution, a much more time limited personal one.

So she wasn't sure if her change of mentality had been because of the man or something separate, a deliberate change from self. Was it a gradual development or a shock to the system based on one journey and one day?

She felt her heart begin its expectant dance of electric jumps, thinking about the next stop when the man would come onto the streetcar and sit next to her and knew that emptiness wasn't the eternal void she practised imagining. They never spoke, only rarely made contact, the briefest of jackets touching arm and once, leg touching leg. It had unnerved her at first, to have anyone so close. It was as if he was touching her bare skin. She could feel the tingles and finally feel alive. Each micro distance she moved her leg nearer had aroused in her a taste of passion and it's potential. She was playing a game with him, as much as she was herself, trying to overstep her own boundaries with a confidence and cheek that had abandoned her before ever finding her. Butterflies would flap their beautiful wings in patterns of suspense and want inside her stomach, even though the experience had moved on from the inchoate.

She had felt so scared of the man when he had first sat down. She hadn't expected that but strangers rarely spoke and she had no confidence to ask him to leave. It was a streetcar after all. Visitors to her home, the people she actually knew, would never sit down next to her on her sofa, yet strangers would even when other seats were available.

At night she pondered possibilities of different futures, had she acted differently at that moment. Only now she was glad she hadn't. Silence had told her to wait and without believing too much in fate she secretly longed for a reason for things, or hoped that there really was such a thing as 'meant to be' and that was why she had not spoken out. It was less for fear than purpose.

The turnaround had surprised her. Lying in bed, a nervous feeling enveloped her; like she was trapped in a bubble with air the running out but that scenario never happening. She had expected those feelings to be gone when she woke but they hadn't, persistent like the drizzle of rains murmurings against the window and roof. She had cried the second night when he had come and sat next to her again, with the empty seats sparsely scattered through the streetcar. Her downcast eyes had still not glimpsed his face; the only thing she had noted was a tattoo on his hand, by his thumb. It was a kingfisher or some other small but similar colourful bird. She looked for significance but could find none, it was almost alive, and the colours had an incandescent or silvery glow. It looked impossible alive, as if it moved ever slightly when she wasn't looking, but just lately she could not truly trust her feelings anyway.

The tattoo had been odd but she always looked at it, she never turned her head sideways or looked at him as he walked towards the seat. She could see out of the side of her eyes, a hazy image, like a fuzzy but bright shadow. What this meant was that she had never really seen him. Continually she wondered why he had sat next to her. She would find out today.

The third night she hadn't cried but it had taken two weeks before she felt anything resembling comfort and not distrust. Before that on the fourth day she changed her time and took the earlier streetcar. He had not been there. She thought she felt better that day but in the back of her mind she had the nagging doubt that she had given in to someone else's power. She wanted to take the early car again the following day. She woke early rubbing a tired dream from her eyes, taking her time making toast and honey, natural sweetness that she only ate so she could lick her lips afterwards. She played with her hair not content with how perfect it looked. Minutes past and she

knew she was late enough to miss that early car. The Friday streetcar was her usual one. For something that had upset her so much previously, she enjoyed the feeling of guilt and intrigue that the man's appearance would provoke.

It was his stop and she sensed a pause as she recognised the figure walk down the streetcar. She had been worried that someone else would sit next to her so she had sat on the outside edge until his stop. When he sat down, she still refused to look at him but she had left her leg encroaching onto his leg space. She was testing the water and as his leg brushed with the weight of a single hair she knew the temperature clearly.

Then the game of wait would begin. Some days she felt the journey went too quickly, she liked his presence even if it was meaningless. At other times it went too slowly, especially when there was no contact. It felt there was no purpose then. She felt hollow and without form and enjoyed the change in work when she could pretend she had a wonderful night drinking with friends when anyone asked.

He was a comfort when he had once been an intimidating stranger, the convergence of the twain, like two parallel lines finally meeting to outflank Euclid. She had been worried the first time that she would have to exit her stop before him and have to ask him to move. But he always got off two stops before her. Whenever that happened, she would hate herself for not talking to him and always be convinced tomorrow would be the day of questioning.

As the day progressed she was glad of the silence and void between them as the whole scenario was built on the unknown. It was the mystery as much as the unseen that kept the pique of interest and 'romance' with a root into the future. It was too precarious to judge whether that same root would feed a flower or a weed. She was nurturing possibility by the very act of inaction.

Romance was a strange word to use but not imprecise. It meant more than the nice smiles that surprised her on occasion because she would see this man again rather than a face that melded into the doorways of the unknown. The smiles were fleeting moments, like seeing one of the street rats stare at her for a few seconds before scurrying away. The rats looked at her more than most people. She wanted to see his eyes, see past the tattoo and the covered body, and see into his mind, his reasoning, and his thoughts, to eventually touch him. She wanted the dream to end and the nightmare to begin because that was what it would be. It would be a nervous serendipity of awakenings.

It was moments away, the tension unbearable in the cold steel sheet. Should she stare at him as soon as he walked on, talk to him as soon as he sat down or wait for a few priceless seconds to build an atmosphere, one only she could feel. The brakes squeaked as the streetcar came to a halt. She heard the rush of noise, like a vacuum having its first taste of fresh air as the doors opened with a gratified sigh. She heard the feet board the streetcar. She looked up, two people showing passes that let them join in the expedition of tin. It was two women, embroiled in complaint about the weather, off on a three-hour trip for a new dishcloth. They sat down and the noise she didn't want to hear broke her out of longing. The door closed. He was not on the streetcar. Why today?

The fact that he wasn't there on the one day she knew she would ask added to the mystery but it irked her as if there really was someone having a joke at her expense. It became the determining conviction that this really was something more than the imagination of a young woman bored with boredom. She wanted to cry but it was like every ounce of feeling had left her body. Fight or flight became a dulled notion that only disillusionment could untangle. The knot in her stomach became an empty hunger. There was always next week.

Clouds that pronounced the arrival of traditional city of rain weather came with the first stirrings of worry as she lay in bed now missing the rare stars that the last few weeks had allowed. Worry ultimately made no sense; it was something that could not be accounted for. She was not able to control the man, what he was doing or where he was and importantly if he was ok. She did it anyway. She was not part of this mans life like he was not part of hers. Maybe he had just liked the thought of mystery in the same way she had, but he had got bored first. She just hoped he was ok. Wherever he was she wanted her thoughts to reach out and find him, offer him a goodbye that she was unable to.

Goodbye before hello seemed a sad end to a broken beginning.

Weeks followed days and bit by bit she stopped thinking about the man as much. The odd thought filtered through but the intensity was now hidden inside her the same way as he was from her. She had stopped getting off at his stop and walking to her workplace. Besides, one of the smiles that had flown her way had ended in a conversation and despite some misgivings she had agreed on a date. She liked this new man. He actually had eyes and a face and occasionally he made her smile. It was something loose and she was becoming fond of the attention he gave her. It didn't matter the same butterflies didn't flutter in her stomach as she took the streetcar to meet him. She could tell his happiness was a genuine reflection of her.

Her thoughts still transgressed and prospered with analogy but they didn't burden her in quite the same way. She even changed jobs, a promotion that sent her to a new part of town. That old streetcar ride had lost its appeal anyway. The man she had met had made a decision to move out of the city at the same time. They had said their goodbyes and she had convinced herself she would miss him so much she even produced a solitary tear, hardly worth wiping away as she could keep it there for effect. He had kissed her forehead and it hadn't felt as nice as the whisper of the stranger's leg even if it was a more traditional goodbye.

She still took the streetcar to work; this time it was a friendlier dragon that moaned a lot less than its brethren. She had begun reading again, except she had forgotten her book so she had picked up a free paper left on the seat by an invisible traveller. She flicked the pages randomly, finding nothing of note. There were names of bands and clubs she had never heard of, pictures of condos she knew she was meant to want. Towards the back, seconds before she was to put it down she noticed a small advert, the symbol making a few hairs stand up on her neck. It was a picture of a kingfisher and underneath it the words 'Kingfisher Tattoos'.

She smiled and all that day pondered whether she should get a tattoo.

The next day a young man was sitting alone in the streetcar. There were empty seats around him but that didn't matter, she wanted to sit next to him. She just didn't feel like talking.