

Shockwave

written by Guest Contributor | September 17, 2021



The F train is decelerating. I can tell from the decrescendo ringing off the cold steel tracks, this orchestra of New York City Transit. I sprint down the steps of 14 Street-Union Square Station and slide into the first car. It's a tiny victory, but one worth celebrating on a Thursday afternoon during rush hour: the first car on the F train minimizes my exit route once I reach Bergen Street and eventually beeline home. One learns quickly to find paths of least resistance in a city of eight million people.

In the crowded front car of the F train, bodies brush, shoulders touch. There are no seats unoccupied, so I stand in the alcove between the seats, in front of the sliding doors, my left thigh grazing one of them. I hold onto a pole in the crook of my jacketed arm, but it's unnecessary: the bodies of strangers encase me in place, to the right, the front, the back. It's March, so there are extra layers between me and the next jacketed body, which makes it feel only a little less encroaching than the summer stickiness of skin on skin. New York City is simultaneously the most intimate and impersonal city in the world.

After a little over a year living here, I'm becoming more fluent in this daily commuter ritual, though most days I still feel like a voyeur, trying on shoes impossibly big for size, not unlike the way I feel about adulthood. I'm 25, in the second year of my PhD at Princeton, reverse-commuting from Brooklyn where I live with my boyfriend, one foot on campus and one foot in Gowanus. Transit, like for so many orbiting this metropolis, is my bridge.

All of my neighbors in the front car are immersed in their screens, necks craned downwards, so I join them in mine. Earbuds in. Podcast on. *This American Life*. This New York City Habitus. Incredibly close yet screenworlds away, willfully disembodied, we pull off the platform and enter the tube of darkness, together. The cold steel screeches, hums, this time a crescendo.

In the cocoon of my ears, Ira Glass is telling me a story about a 1930s Russian surgeon with appendicitis who performs emergency surgery on himself. Glass reads from the surgeon's diary, noting where the first-person shifts to

the third; the “I” surgeon becomes the “he” patient. In the first-person, the surgeon describes how, deprived of his usual facilities of direct sight, he works mostly by touch. He makes a cut into the third- person patient, which was always already himself.

I close my eyes, trying to envision it all—the compromised line of sight from one’s own eyes to one’s own abdomen, what it must feel like to take scalpel to one’s own flesh. Does the tension of knife against layers of skin, fat, muscle, somehow tell you how far you have cut? How far you have left to go? Before you go too far?

Glass is describing the tentacular anatomy of the appendix and intestines, and I am completely enraptured in the surgery, when a sound thunders from somewhere to my left. I don’t hear it as much as I feel it: it seems to be emanating from the train’s door panels to my immediate left, the cold steel sending reverberations through my left thigh. The best possible description I can think of is: *corporeal thud*.

What I do hear are the “ohhh’s” rippling like a shockwave down the car. The cold steel decrescendos once again, screeching to a halt.

Either something hit us, or we hit something. The door quiver continues to echo through my bones, like a shiver that cannot be quelled, despite my heavy down coat.

The conductor’s Long Island accent rasps thickly over the subway’s PA system in what may as well have been an automated recording. “Due to an issue with the track, we will be stopped momentarily. Apologies for the inconvenience. After an investigation we will resume service.”

A familiar dread starts to bubble up beneath my skin. First, the rising lump in my airway. The quickening pulse. The sudden feeling that I must remove my hat, my scarf, my coat. The oppressive heat. And here come the sweating palms, as if on cue. *Look up. So much space between you and the ceiling. Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can smell...*

Not now, please, I silently berate myself. But wishing claustrophobia away only emboldens the beast. It’s a predictable response, one I’m intimately familiar with, an instinct seeded in childhood, perhaps partially inherited. Was it my father’s, his stories of claustrophobia from inside the belly of countless MRI machines? Or my mother’s, her hand gripping so tightly it almost hurt, dragging seven-year-old me wordlessly in panic through thickly bodied crowds of a Las Vegas casino to the exit? In any case, it announces itself in my synapses when cornered, enclosed. A jammed bathroom door. An old hand-cranked elevator. During any subway stop occurring unannounced between platforms. Like now. *Get. Out.* It screams.

Except for that I can’t. The doors are locked and we’re nowhere near the next station. I check my phone for a signal: no service. No Exit.

My attempts to hide my growing panic are futile. My shoulder-brushing-neighbor to the right, a woman with curler-roll bangs, seems to have noticed

my silent wrestling match with distress. She looks at me with searching eyes through her horn-rimmed glasses. "Where do you live?"

"Brooklyn. You?" Gulp. I scan my surroundings like my therapist has told me to do when the panic hits. A pocket here. Look at the laces on those boots. So much space between me and this door. Right?

"Upper West Side." She pauses, searching me again. "Are you from here?" "Well no, I'm originally from Oregon."

"Aha," she chuckles as if the very fact of it explains everything. "Not much of this in Oregon, is there?" I manage a feeble smile. My lower lip wobbles. "Wendy," she says. "Allie," I nod. Wendy offers a steady stream of conversational questions, as if we were sitting down for coffee on a blind date. I have to admit they transport me, despite their tedium, if only for brief moments. After awhile, I start to wonder if Wendy is not only trying to occupy me, but also herself.

Wendy's questions cannot keep me from incessantly checking my watch. Twenty minutes have passed. The air conditioner has turned off and my sweat glands have turned on. The lights in the cabin dim, compressing the space between me, the door, and the ceiling. The air feels heavy. I notice I'm now not the only uneasy one. For some reason our individual screenworlds have lost their allure. More are looking up, gazing worriedly, though avoiding sustained eye contact. "What the hell is this?" someone wonders aloud, giving voice to our collective confusion. Other speculations start to circulate, murmurs about what exactly it was that collided with the door. *How long does it take before we're all breathing in each other's' carbon dioxide?* I muse to myself, joining the chorus. *No, intrusive thoughts* (labeling them helps, I'm told). *Stop. Keep up the small talk with Wendy From The Upper West Side.*

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In his one-act existentialist tragedy, *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes about three individuals trapped in confinement together in Hell. Although Hell, in this case, appears to be a drawing room ornately styled in the image of the French Second Empire, with unopenable doors and unrelentless lighting. Torture, we come to find in the exchange among these trapped souls, is not the circumstance but the unremitting gaze of others. Hell is not a place made by an unfathomable and spiteful God but rather, as the line famously goes, "Hell is other people."

Being stuck does something to the gaze of others, as it does to the gaze of the self, and the self being gazed upon. As an exasperated Inez puts it in Sartre's Hell, *"Your silence clamors in my ears. You can nail up your mouth, cut your tongue out—but you can't prevent your being there. Can you stop your thoughts? I hear them ticking away like a clock, tick-tock, tick-tock, and I'm certain you hear mine... you're everywhere, and every sound comes to me*

soiled, because you've intercepted it on its way." Gaze is not confined to eyesight but rather to proximity, made suffocating by the inability to escape—the felt heat of another body, their deafening silence.

And yet. There is also something to this soiling of shared experience, the interception itself. In the way it passes through one on its way to the other. In the way that sharing in an impossible experience breathes it into life, witnessing one another in an inhospitable, uncanny, inescapable situation, by the simple fact of sharing space and time.

In Sartre's Hell, the collective sublimates the individual. Even one's own consciousness becomes permeable, inhabitable, by another. There is no separate. The third person becomes the first, and back again.

Here in the front car of the F train, I welcome this blurring. The presence of others offers an opening, an escape from my own body clamoring to escape itself. Wendy's conversation steals me from my personal claustrophobic hell; other passengers' speculations confirm our shared surreal reality. Witnessing collectively the scene—and one another—unfolding before our eyes, we share an unspoken and bizarre sense that something is coming undone.

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Flashlights begin to dance like strobes on the subway's windows. They illuminate the cavernous walls carved deep under the streets of Manhattan over a century ago. I wonder how many rats are scattering between the steel rails beneath my feet.

We have new neighbors in the front car, now. People in dark blue garb with shiny silver badges engraved with the letters "NYPD" walk up and down the car. Others with slightly heavier, more utilitarian gray coats with the letters "NYFD" sewn down the arm, too. Sweat drips down their brows, their foreheads, their cheeks.

The word must have come from someone, or maybe even from the collective body of the front car itself, but in any case, it hangs over all of us like a sentencing: "*Decapitated.*"

I struggle to place this word—*decapitated*—with previous contexts I had heard it—*beheading? torture? the fate of Henry the VIII's second wife Anne Boleyn, accused of adultery and witchcraft?*—into the subway tunnel and into the car. It takes me a moment to realize that this sentence contained in one word was also a descriptor. Explaining a cause for our sudden halt.

Some scream, upon hearing it. Others wail. A few flock to the windows, craning necks and heads to peer out. I watch them and close my eyes. My own head feels as if it is floating in some nebulous space above my body,

watching the scene from above with disembodied distance. The corporeal thud reverberates in my left thigh like an aftershock.

“There has been a customer injury. We are waiting for EMS and the NYPD to arrive on scene.” The Long Island accent on the loudspeaker narrates the scene unfolding before our very eyes.

“A customer *injury*? That’s one way to put it,” a man scoffs. I taste steel in my mouth as my stomach sinks.

“There has been a customer injury...” The Long Island accent continues. I don’t catch much else of what it has to say, except the word, “Evacuate.”

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What does it mean to witness? Or rather, to *bear* witness? The word itself, witness, is both noun and verb. As noun, it describes a person who testifies to a fact or event, this knowledge garnered from personal experience. In its verb form, it is something an individual *does* by virtue of their physical presence and faculties of observation. In the realm of witnessing, the visual is often privileged over all other senses. *Eyewitnesses* are called to the stand to testify (not, as it were, thigh-witnesses).

But in the absence of a clear line of sight, as in the dark caverns of the New York City Subway, the hierarchy of the visual fails to hold. Other senses fill in. Not unlike the Russian surgeon, for whom touch provided information to remove the internal source of rupture within, to suture himself back up again. A sensorial witnessing.

Just as the limits of my own witnessing transcend the limits of my own corpus, entering the realm of the collective, so too do the limits of my sight. They are outsourced to the quivering thigh, the other coated bodies still holding me in place, the corporeal thud still ringing in my ears. Sensory cues take up residence in the body; stitched together, however crooked and imperfectly. Experience becomes evidence, even if inconclusive. It does not need to be seen to be known. But knowing, like sight, has its own limits.

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Gloved canvas hands of an NYFD firefighter firmly grab my upper arm. They lead me to the front of the car, into the driver’s cabin. Another canvas-gloved hand meets my own and helps me step out of the driver’s door and onto the tracks below.

They're worried we'll step on the wrong part of the tracks; there's a risk of electrocution, so each of us has our own personal escort, until we reach the other side of the tracks. Just to be moving feels like progress, although my knees wobble as if they were someone else's. They/we/I march quietly in the darkness. I do not realize that we are tracing a slight curve until there emerges from the right the most literal light at the end of the tunnel I will ever see. "West 4th" I hear another omnipotent narrator say. I exhale at the sight of the station and wonder how long I'd been holding my breath.

Another hand reaches around my shoulder, ungloved, pulling me in close, and our trembling bodies hold each other as we carefully place each foot on a wooden pallet, avoiding the rails. We step in synchrony this way, as if our hip joints were attached to the same femoral head. It's dark, so I can't see the body to whom the arm is attached, but it is warm and feels soft.

"Holy shit I need a hug we're okay right we're okay phew we're all okay..." I can hardly keep up with my ambulation partner's words, let alone his steps. We reach the platform, a journey of 100? 200? 500? meters that felt like 10 miles. His arms help hoist me up on the edge of the platform, and we both climb out.

In the fluorescent light of West 4th station, I finally see his face. It looks like I feel—wide eyes, gaping mouth, disorientation. He's relatively young, mid-30s at most, with thick chestnut brown hair and an exaggerated side-part, hair swept to the left, held in place with gel, to match a gelled mustache. He is wearing suspenders and a white button-down, underneath an unbuttoned winter trenchcoat, and his sartorial aesthetic seems slightly out of space and time.

"What's your name?" I ask. "Louie. Yours?" "Allie." Louie pulls me in for an embrace, which under any other circumstance with a stranger might feel violating, but here feels oddly comforting. For a moment, Louie and I hold each other in this way: the way I would hold my mother, my father, my brother, my partner. I can feel his heart racing through his coat, as rapidly as my own. Louie eventually pulls away, his hands on my shoulders still, and looks me in the eye. "We made it. We're okay. You gonna be okay? Hang in there, kid." And just like that, Louie turns, and sprints up the steps of West 4th as if he was running from a ghost.

It's only then that I look around and notice the desolation. One of the busiest and most popular subway stations in Manhattan is all but deserted, save for the slow stream of my fellow passengers, still marching in a zombie-like haze down the tunnel, flashlights dancing on the cavernous walls. Yellow police tape is strewn haphazardly across the platform. A crime scene.

I come to the conclusion that there is nothing left for me to do but to exit. My feet drag like lead up the stairs of West 4th Station, into the blinding light of an early spring late-afternoon in Greenwich Village. Taxis and cyclists whirl by as the city dances its usual symphony, and the normalcy of it all feels so deeply insulting, so deeply impersonal, so deeply disconnected. A life lost somewhere in the caverns between 14th Street and West 4th. So many lives before and after, ending and continuing. Like a

shockwave, it all loses momentum as we ripple outwards into the spirals of this whirling city. Underneath us, the subway rumbles on.

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That night, back in our apartment, in the bath that my bewildered boyfriend draws for me, I rest my left thigh on the rim of the tub. It is still buzzing with the aftershock, and so am I. I take a deep inhale and submerge under the tub water until, finally, all of me feels like I'm floating.

I think about bodies and boundaries and barriers and strangers, until my mind is spinning, and that stranger's body that hit the barrier between me and that steel whooshing world sends another spasm through my left thigh. I am still in that front car of the F train; I am Wendy; I am Louie; I am not here.

When I can't hold my breath any longer, I resurface. Eyes above water, I open them. I stare down at the pale flesh of my own abdomen and wonder what it would take to suture myself up again, like the Russian surgeon; to call all parts of me from the front car back here, into the tub.

The narrator in my still-floating head, grasping for explanation, grapples with whether I have witnessed a death for the first time. I didn't see anything; technically the thud could have just as well been something inanimate. Save for the commentary that echoed down our car, seemingly confirmed by the presence of authorities (paramedics, firefighters, cops, the conductor), that word ("decapitated"), a human body would never have entered my imagination of possibility. It all seemed like a nightmare, the kind where your subconscious elevates the most assaulting and gruesome details to the fore and says, "yes, that'll do."

But these insignia seemed to validate the fact I did *feel* something: in my bones. I also perceived it through the sounds and voices and hands and faces of all my other fellow partial-witnesses. Wendy's nervous banter; Louie's hug. Together, we pieced together collective fragments of narration, trying to create meaning out of meaninglessness. But some things remain unknowable.

In the days that follow, I scour news sites for reports, even though most of me doesn't want to—the uncanniness of it all begs for some sort of anchoring, some sort of evidence of what it was that happened, what it was we witnessed, if only incompletely. Most of what I find shocks me: that there are many fatal occurrences involving the subway, seemingly more days than not.

Several days later, I trace a report to a fatal subway surfing on the F train. The report uses the incident as an example for a story on the rising trend of subway surfing, where individuals (often in their teens or early 20s) climb atop the car or outside a door, freeriding the train on its periphery. There are no identifying details, not any I would recognize anyways. Somewhere deep in me, anger wells. It feels dehumanizing, that this

individual life was a case study, or rather, a statistic. Then again, I ask myself as I write down all of the sensory details, my own form of bloodletting and processing and bearing- witness, if I am not doing the exact same. How do you write about someone you cannot trace? What, exactly, is being witnessed?

I will never know why that body barreled into that barrier. Or to which life that body was attached, and which lives they touched and whose lives they called home. Or even whether, for a fleeting moment, they felt something resembling exhilaration or fear or transcendence, riding on the surface of the subway's own body through the steel whooshing world, while the rest of ours were contained inside. All of this haunts me. But one thing I know. For a second, we (that body, that person; my body, me) shared that reverberating shockwave, the physics of one life there and then not, and another carrying onward, outward.



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