Train to Freedom

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Train to Freedom

LAUREN SMITH

It is evening, just twilight, and Wally sits with Del on the porch swing, creaking back and forth, their feet pushing in unison against the worn paint. Wally looks straight down at his hands. He is aware of Del, of her gray eyes watching him looking at his hands. Though they have been inseparable since grade school, as of late Wally cannot meet Del's eyes, but he wishes he could move his hands through her dark red hair, or rub a thumb over the tiny scar under her left eye. Only once did he find the courage to ask how she got that scar. They had been in the woods at the pond trying to catch frogs. They were both sixteen then, only a year ago—too young to drive into town, too old not to want to be together, away from other people, alone. After Wally asked about her scar, Del's face went slack. She squatted down at the edge of the pond and began gathering handfuls of mud, squeezing the mud so that it oozed out between her fingers. Wally watched her, uncertain of what to say or do. The small muscles in her forearms tensed with each handful, and the tendons in her wrists jumped, forming the ridges of tree trunks that looked as though they would break through her skin. He held his own arms tightly across his chest. Finally Del stood up, her feet covered to the ankles in mud, her hands covered in globs of it, and she stood in front of Wally.

"I don't remember, okay?" she said. Then with one finger she smeared mud underneath Wally's eye. "Now you have one, too."

Wally never asked Del about the scar again, but he knew she remembered.

Now sitting here with Del, Wally wants to leave this place and take Del with him. He could take care of her, he knows. She is strong, but he's afraid she uses all her strength to hold him up. He wants her to need him as much as he needs her. They could both walk away, out from under the talk of people—small town talk of which he is sick and tired. It's amazing how much he hears just in passing. Wally and his father are constant fodder for gossip—"The man can't say two pleasant words," the older ladies say to one another over cups of sugary coffee, while the teachers gather in the lounge at school, concerned about more that a mere lack of politeness. They can't forget the day, when Wally was in the
seventh grade, that he stood trembling in the principal’s office as the secretary frantically called the bus driver over the radio. “Jim Kendel’s son missed the bus. Can you turn around and come pick him up?” For almost any other child the secretary would have called the parent, but she had heard stories of Wally’s father’s rage; her husband had seen the hole he punched in the wall at the bar. No one had ever seen a mark on the boy, but he rarely smiled—. So people gossip about Wally and his father, always coming to the conclusion that the absence of a woman in their house is at the root of their problems, but they talk about Del, too. She comes from an upright, normal family, but she lives outside that normalcy, concentrating on strange things: rain traveling down a window, fireflies dancing through night air, Wally. She focuses on details as though this will take her out of this world, as though she can become immune to her memories. Wally loves her strangeness. She has a photo on her dresser of his ear. “It glows red in the sun,” he remembers her saying, and though he’s a bit embarrassed by the photo, he loves the fact that Del set it in a thin silver frame.

Wally has always hated his ears—the way they stick out from his head and burn every day as he travels down the hall at school, unable to block out the jokes, the comments. He’s always walked with his head bent toward the ground, wishing his skin would clear up, wishing words would come out his mouth in more than just a stumbling mumble, wishing his father would not make it home from work one evening. Wally hates himself for thinking this last thought. He feels he should respect the man who has never hit him (or touched him, held him) and has always provided for him. He should harbor no ill feelings toward this man he fears, his father, who, for as long as Wally can remember, has not only whipped him with words but starved him with silence.

Though there have been many moments in which Wally was beaten to the ground like a dog, there are only a few that he remembers with painful clarity, and one that keeps afloat on the surface of his mind. When he was fourteen Wally was chosen to be first chair in the high school orchestra. The local paper featured an article with a photo of him holding his violin. In the photo he is dressed in a black tie and jacket, and his eyes reveal the pride his face tries to conceal. For the entire day he felt he could do anything, but when he returned home late that evening from orchestra practice in a rush to get upstairs to his room where he could carefully paste the article in a scrapbook, he found his father already home.

The man sat eating at the kitchen table and barely looked up when Wally said hello. Instead he motioned to the stove, telling Wally in short sentences dinner was still warm. Wally’s father scraped his own plate clean and sat back in his chair. He asked Wally what he was so happy about, and Wally handed him the article, knowing that if he said anything his father would cut him off. Instead he watched his father’s eyes glance over the article, hoping the honor he’d received might make him proud. But his father let a hard, short breath out his nose and shook his head before pushing back his chair and heading into
the living room. Once again Wally had lost, and the next morning he found a note on top of the newspaper that read, "I didn't raise a girl."

From that moment on Wally has known, and at times accepted—it's getting harder not to believe—something for sure. He is a sissy. He is soft around the edges. He likes to play the violin and draw and walk in the woods when he should be roughening his hands, hardening his muscles and his words, eliminating the softness. His father despises him. Wally needs to start acting like a man.

Wally wants to forget all this for right now. Still looking down at his hands, he feels Del's eyes move away from him as she turns her head to look out across the yard. Now he can look at her. He studies the profile of her face, her fine nose, the slight droop of her left eye, the way her top teeth protrude just a bit—not enough to be buck teeth, but enough so that her smile is odd and beautiful.

"Come on. I want to show you something." Del stands up and extends her hand out to Wally. Her sudden movement makes the swing's motion jerky and uneven. Wally takes her hand and gets to his feet, letting her lead him to wherever. Wally hasn't any idea where they're going. He can't concentrate on anything but the slight pressure of Del's hand against his, the way the grass blurs, even at their walking pace. Del's hand presses against his and he lifts his eyes from the grass to the blue-gray trees. He narrows his eyes to see the first star out tonight. Del looks at him and laughs.

She speeds up her pace. They rush through the yard and out to the road that runs past Del's house. They pass houses all lit up from the inside, windows open to let in the night air that smells of cut grass and sun-soaked earth cooling with the first drops of dew. A train whistle blows in the near distance, and Del tightens her grip and begins to run. Another block and Wally sees the train tracks laid out perpendicular to the road on which he and Del are running. It is almost dark now, and the street lamps spread their orange glow out over the road, just reaching the edges of yards. The train sounds its whistle again, and this time the sound fills the air directly above them. It surrounds them, seeping into their eardrums, rumbling in their chests. Del lets out a whoop and lets go of Wally's hand. The train is rushing past now, sending out its warning to anyone or anything that might be in its path. Del sprints toward the train, her arms spread out as though she were preparing to fly. She yells as she runs. Wally can't see her face, but imagines it to be stretched and contorted, her eyes closed, jumping underneath the eyelids. She's not going to stop. She's going to run herself right into the side of the rushing train. Wally can't move. He can only watch as Del rushes on, her arms open, her head thrown back, the yell still escaping her lungs.

Then she stops, mere feet from the blur of metal. Wally watches as Del stands in the rush and fury of air. Her hair is blowing all around her, wild, forming tangles. He yells to her, but the noise of the train blocks his voice, throws it back behind him. He is afraid to walk to her, afraid the wheels might slip off the tracks and drag tons of metal onto their bodies, grinding them into the dirt and pavement. At the same time, if the train were to slide off the tracks, he would
want to be crushed along with her. Only a coward would let his best friend die
as he stood in the background and watched. Still, he cannot move.

The end of the train comes and goes, its clatter and whistle fading as it moves
further down the tracks. Del drops her arms to her sides, and she continues to
stand in the same place, swaying back and forth as a young tree might in the
wind. Wally yells to her again. This time she turns around and he walks toward
her. Something about the way she’s standing raises the hair on the back of his
neck, puts him on edge. When he comes close to her he can see her eyes. They
look past him, unblinking, into the night air.

“I could’ve kept running,” she says. She is still swaying, but now her eyes
meet his, and this time he doesn’t look away. “I could’ve smashed myself against
the train, and I just have to wonder: would I have been crushed or would I have
been flung a long ways down the road?” She takes a deep breath and the life
comes back into her eyes. “I guess we’ll never know, now will we?”

Wally starts to say, “Snap out of it, Del. You’re too perfect to ever be crushed.
You’re insane, insane, insane. You’re perfect. Don’t ever do that again. Tell me
why you did do it.” He says nothing, though. His legs move on their own as he
and Del walk away, back to her house. She hooks her arm through Wally’s and
smiles, as though they are merely taking an evening walk. He has to turn his
head away so she can’t see him crying.

Wally walks Del back to her house before heading home, and when he
reaches his house the windows are still dark. Maybe this will be the night his
father doesn’t come home, Wally thinks. He imagines what that would be like.
The early morning phone call. The funeral arrangements. The casseroles turn­
ing cold and soggy on the kitchen counter. The obituary: Jim Kendel, 43, was
killed in a car accident Wednesday night. He leaves behind no one but his son,
Wally, who is now free.

Free. Freedom. Wally says these words, just under his breath, over and over.
He relishes the taste they leave in his mouth, the way they feel rolling over his
tongue and against his teeth. He is seventeen, nearly a man, though not by his
father’s standards. Living with his father leaves his chest heavy and empty, but
it’s what he knows. He would feel lost, and survival without his father would
take some getting used to, but eventually he would become stronger,
self-reliant yet still soft around the edges. And that would be okay.

His mind shifts, and it is not his father’s funeral he imagines, but Del’s.
What happened this evening was such an insignificant moment. He tries to
believe this. People do this all the time, stand close to the tracks so they can
feel the rumble and rush of air, perhaps even placing themselves on the tracks,
jumping away at the last second. But tonight something surfaced in Del that he
never knew to be there. It was as if the mud oozing from between her fingers
finally covered her whole body, making it impossible for her to think clearly.
Perhaps her strength finally gave out. Maybe she’s grown tired of trying to see
past the whispers and the stares, or maybe she’s never seen past, but has been
ignoring the reality around her. She didn’t want to believe she mattered only
to one person. Wally knows the façade she made for herself is crumbling, that she is not so strong on the inside.

Wally stands in the living room as he thinks through all this. His brown hair clings to his forehead, and his eyes itch from the dried salt water around their edges. He smells the musty odor of the carpet, the yellow age of the wallpaper. He hears his father's truck pull up the driveway, and something in him clicks. He remains where he is. His heart does not race, his hands do not sweat in anticipation of greeting his father. He stands there as he hears his father's footsteps on the porch. He stands as his father opens the door and walks in. He stands as his father moves down the hallway and turns into the living room. His father stops when he sees Wally, and then he continues past him, sits in his chair and turns on the television. Wally's back is to his father, and he feels his chest and eyes harden.

"How was your day, Dad?" Wally asks. He breathes slowly through his nose, feeling his heart beat calmly against his chest. His father grunts a reply and turns up the volume. "I'm going upstairs now," Wally says and steps into the hallway. "See you in the morning." No sound but voices sounding details of interceptions and touch-downs, play by play.

In his room, Wally places a shirt, jeans, underwear, and fifty dollars into his backpack. He will take nothing more. Anything else would only remind him of this place: this town, this house, his father. He will leave tonight and walk over to Del's where he will find her asleep on the porch, curled up under a blanket on the swing because she felt she was suffocating when surrounded by the walls of her room. He will gently shake her awake, whisper to her, and she will go inside, gather up a few things, and then she and Wally will walk down the road that runs past her house, across the train tracks to the bus station. They will buy their tickets to anywhere.

Wally walks downstairs. His heart begins to beat faster, but his ears don't burn and his eyes are steady, cold. He walks to the front door, past the living room, where his father still sits in the television's blue light. His father notices him and asks where he's going. Wally stops but doesn't answer. He hears his father hoist himself from his chair. Wally turns to face him as his father walks into the hallway.

"I said where're you going? Answer me."

Wally still doesn't answer, but instead watches his father with his cold eyes, watches the man's fists clench, sees the red splotches stand out high on his cheeks and on his neck. For the first time in his life, Wally meets his father's stare, and what he sees underneath the rage gives him confidence. His father's eyes are tired and empty. He hears his father yell at him, but the words hold no meaning. They never have. Wally stands in the rush and fury of his father, letting the words speed past him. Never again will he be crushed by the man's huge weight. He will not let himself be ground into the dirt any longer by his father's words careening toward him, words that are deliberate, cutting, lost, and he knows all of this now as he should have known years ago.